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SLAYERS SPECIAL! VOLUME 30
The Silver Bullet
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The Dancing Labyrinth

"Stop it right thereeeee!" I was desperately stopped just as I was about to chant the Dragon Slave. The blonde middle-aged man who stood in front of me with his arms spread wide had a look of absolute desperation on his face. "Lina-kun! That spell you were just about to chant—I saw it was something quite powerful! I bet you were planning to blow the whole ruins away with a high-output spell, weren't you?"

On a certain month, and a certain day. Mr. Magrid had requested me, while I was stopping by Vait City, to exterminate harmful beasts that had appeared in some ruins.

He was well-versed in the chaotic language used when casting spells, after all. Therefore, when I began to chant the spell, he had sensed the dangerous nature of it from its content. However, I hadn't been chanting without thinking.

I stared at Mr. Magrid and spoke with a serious face, "But considering the purpose of the request, this should be the most certain and rational way." I said with confidence.

I was going down a forest path in the mountains, somewhat distant from Vait City where I received the request. This place, where I had arrived under Mr. Magrid's guidance, lacked even a trail left by beasts and was buried in greenery; neither the city nor the highway was visible from here.

The reason for the request was that they couldn't even conduct an internal survey, and if by any chance those things came outside and attacked people, it would be a disaster. The request was to exterminate them before that happened. In that case... "Well... I understand the feeling that it's a waste to blow up unexplored ruins," I said as I looked around.

"So... I guess I don’t have to." I interrupted the spell I was about to chant and nodded honestly. I thought about playing dumb, but that probably wouldn't work. After all, the man in front of me, Taurus Magrid, was in the same business as me—in other words, a sorcerer.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was a handsome type, with short blonde hair and a rather sturdy, well-built frame. At first glance, he looked like the physical type who would look good in armor, but he was wearing a black robe and a black mantle.

Despite his appearance, this person was actually the Vice-Councilor of the Vait City Sorcerers' Guild.

Mr. Magrid was the one entrusted with leading the research team. However, during the survey of the ruins, a trap that had been set was triggered, and beasts—presumably meant for repelling intruders—were released inside the ruins. While no one died, several people were injured while fleeing.

To be blunt, I wanted to blow the ruins away with an attack spell and finish the request quickly. After the research team left the ruins, they apparently sealed the entrance for the time being, but if the beasts were gone…

"Vait City is just a little distance away. If you cross the mountain, there's the royal capital of Kalmart. There are other villages and towns of various sizes around here, right?

If by some chance the beasts leave the ruins and go that far to attack people, it will become an irreparable, major problem. If so, I think it's best to take the safest and most certain means," I tried saying in a way that made my logic sound quite plausible.

At my point, Mr. Magrid's fists trembled. "Lina-kun. What you say may be correct. Howeveeeeer!" He cut me off and pointed sharply toward the ruins. It was a bit of a distance from here, but I could see even from afar that the earth was exposed where it was buried in green.

It's common for ruins to be discovered when a landslide creates a gap in the mountains like that, and this was likely that pattern. "Ruins are the proof that our predecessors lived! So it is also our duty as sorcerers to pass on what should be told from that proof to future generations!

Of course, we must protect the safety of the people living now! But! Even so, to erase the ruins without even making an effort is to deny the proof that our predecessors lived! I cannot do such a thing! Lina-kun, your plan may be right, but it should be the very last resort after making every possible effort! ..."

Internally, I groaned slightly. I didn't dislike people with hot passion, but sometimes passion takes the lead and they lose sight of their surroundings. It would be fine if Mr. Magrid wasn't that type of person... though well, it wasn't as if I absolutely had to blow up the entire ruins.

The reward amount had been settled upon with the expectation that things might turn out this way. "......Well then, for today, we'll just enter the ruins for a bit of scouting. We'll get a grasp of the general layout of the ruins and how many beasts there are. Based on that, we'll form a serious extermination plan. Maybe we'll need more people for the actual extermination."

"Wait there, you beasts! Now, Lina-kun, whom I have hired, is going to defeat every single one of you!" Letting out an incredibly reliant-on-others line with all his might, Mr. Magrid began walking toward the ruins.

Beyond the crumbled cliff, a thick stone wall was visible. Part of the wall had been removed, and a passage continued to the left and right in the back. I stepped toward the entrance and checked the ground nearby. On the exposed ground in front of the hole, various stones of different sizes were scattered—and near the hole, there were footprints.

"What?" I asked as Mr. Magrid trembled "What's wrong?" I said to him,
"No way!?" Witnessing the sight before him, Mr. Magrid let out a voice of shock.

"We were supposed to have sealed the entrance!" —Come to think of it— I'm sure that's what he said earlier. "I certainly saw with my own eyes that we used a spell to create stone dolls, had them carry rocks, and piled them in front of this entrance to seal it properly! We were supposed to keep them from getting out while we planned a countermeasure for the beasts! So why have those rocks been torn down!"

...I see. In that case, the rocks scattered around were the ones that had been blocking the entrance. While there were various sizes, it was certain they weren't a size that could be moved easily.

Mr. Magrid came running over. Several footprints of different sizes were carved into the ground nearby. The toes were pointed toward the gaping hole. "That means someone moved the rocks at the entrance and went inside." "No way!"

To his doubt, I pointed at one of the footprints. "Look at this. There's a footprint on the spot after the entrance rock was moved. If so, there's only one answer." Mr. Magrid fell silent for a moment with a bitter expression. "You mean... ruin thieves?"

"Most likely. Since there are several types of footprints, there's more than one. Plus, there are no footprints facing the opposite direction. In other words, those guys went in, but haven't come out yet.

I don't know if they were finished off by the beasts inside, or if they went in just before we arrived and are currently scouting for treasure. At any rate, if we leave them be, they'll either be stranded inside or they'll carry out the treasure—"

"Then let's go!" Mr. Magrid said without hesitation. He picked up a stick that had fallen nearby and chanted a spell under his breath. "Light!" A magical light lit up at the tip of the stick, creating an improvised torch.

"Come on, let's go, Lina-kun! What are you dawdling for?" "...Wait, are you coming too, Mr. Magrid?" "Of course! I have been here once before! If I don't go in, who will guide you through the interior!"

...To be honest, I didn't dislike his straightforwardness. However, when it came down to it, it's just easier to move alone... I pulled out the short sword at my waist and lit a magical light at its tip to use as a torch.

"—Then, I'll go first. I'll leave the rear to you, Mr. Magrid." "Yeah! Leave it to me!" He gave an unnecessarily spirited reply. Thus, the two of us, Mr. Magrid and I, stepped into the ruins.

The light pushed back the darkness, illuminating the dry stone walls. The protrusions here and there on the walls were likely for lamps. The areas above them were dirty and black with soot.

The passage wasn't very wide. It was fine for normal walking, but too narrow for swinging weapons around.

"Be careful! We don't know when the beasts might come out!" Mr. Magrid said as he walked behind me. He seemed to be keeping his voice down for the most part, but there was still useless strength in his words.

Following Mr. Magrid's guidance, we proceeded to the right from the passage we entered through the hole. "Roger. So, what kind of guys are they? Those beasts." "Let's see... they feel like Lizardmen but if you made them even more lizard-like. Their tails and necks are long, and their head height is close to the ceiling of this passage."

I looked up at the ceiling. It was decorated with carvings, and the height was about as high as an adult man could reach. If their height was that close to the ceiling, they would probably be quite intimidating up close.

"They didn't seem to have intelligence, but the problem is we don't know how many there are. It's certain there were at least two.

Since everyone ran away as soon as we saw them, I don't know how tough they are in a fight. However, considering all the investigators managed to escape, they probably aren't faster than humans." "I see."

As we talked, I was naturally paying attention to our surroundings, but so far, there was no sign of anything.

“What's the layout of these ruins? Of course, just as far as you know," I asked. Magrid looked troubled and explained, "If we head to the opposite side, we’ll hit a dead end with a door that has a troublesome lock. When I came to investigate before, I put that off for later and checked this way instead. That’s why we’re heading this way first, since I'm familiar with it.

If we go a little further, we’ll come out into a large room. From there, we enter the main body of the ruins. Multiple paths and numerous traps are waiting. Releasing those beasts was also the result of one of those traps. That was... a terrifying trap...!"

"And what kind of trap was that, exactly?" I inquired.

In places like this, traps usually involved stepping on a specific floor tile or touching dummy treasure.

"Further in from that room, there was a very suspicious-looking altar," Magrid said. "And on that altar, there was a very suspicious button, with 'DO NOT PUSH' written in large letters..."

"And you fell for that?! I mean, human nature makes you want to do the things you're told not to, but still!" I snapped, turning around to retort.

Magrid immediately shot back, "Wrong! It was such a textbook, obvious trap that I instinctively shouted, 'Who would fall for such a cliché trap?!' and delivered a backhanded 'tsukkomi' strike[1] to the button!"

"You were the one who released the beasts after all! You fell for the trap anyway!" I yelled.

"Lina, you haven't seen it, so you don't understand! The sheer horror of that trap!" Magrid muttered.

I followed after him and noted, "True... that half-open door is bothering me."

The sliding-type door was left slightly ajar, and light was leaking through the gap. I killed the sound of my footsteps as I approached, peeking through the crack. "I see..." I whispered. I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

It was a large, circular room made of stone. The light was likely lit by previous visitors; magical lights near the ceiling illuminated the area with a white glow.

"Triggering a retort and luring one into a trap—it's a clever tactic! Truly the work of a demonic intellect!" Magrid exclaimed.

"Is it really 'intellect' though...?" I wondered, tilting my head slightly.

I realized that Magrid, being the Vice-Chairman, had probably headed to the site without any subordinates and hired me because he felt responsible for triggering the trap himself.

The room had rusted iron doors to the left, right, and center. Either way, there was no point in blaming Magrid now. There was no sign of anyone inside, but I figured I'd need to be careful so he didn't trigger any more weird traps. As we spoke and moved

[1] This is a kansai comedy routine thing, in this case it's like the serious guy backhanded smacking the goofball over the head and going "You've got to be kidding me!".

forward, we both stopped at the same time. At the end of the passage was another iron door covered in rust.

"The lock was on this one too, but it wasn't that hard to open. However..." Magrid started.

"So that's the 'beast' you mentioned," I said upon seeing it.

In the middle of the room, slightly to the right, stood a beast frozen solid. Just as Magrid had described, it looked like a lizardman knock-off. It had no wings and small, disproportionate arms. It didn't quite look like a dragon, either.

"The previous guests probably ran into this beast, froze it with a spell, and moved deeper inside... which means even if we meet humans, we shouldn't let our guard down," I noted.

"Yeah. Understood. I'll keep that in mind," Magrid replied.

"So, which way was the investigation headed?" I asked.

Like the areas we had passed through, the walls and ceiling were covered in decorative carvings. There was a possibility of hidden passages or switches, but we didn't have time for a detailed search.

"Is it not locked?" I asked.

He nodded gravely. "Yes. We wondered about that too. But once we thought about it, the reason became clear. These doors have to be like this, otherwise the beasts wouldn't be able to pass through."

"I see," I replied.

Including the one we had just entered through, there were four doors. If we went left, there was another identical circular room at the end of a similar passage.

"Magrid, be really careful from here on out," I warned.

"Yes! I know! Last time I didn't have any preparations and had to run, but this time I have Lina! Against mere beasts—"

"I'm saying you need to watch out for the 'previous guests'—the ruin thieves—as well as the beasts," I interrupted. "A beast is frozen solid, and the magical lights haven't gone out yet. That means there's someone among the thieves who can use offensive spells.

I don't know how we look to them, but there's a chance they'll fire off an attack spell the moment we meet."

I started walking toward the left. Magrid didn't object and followed me. The iron door there was different from the one before. It was still rusty, but it lacked anything resembling a doorknob.

"What is this...?" I asked, confused.

"You do it like this," Magrid said, stepping forward and casually pushing the edge of the door. It swung open toward the back without a sound.

Beyond it was a straight, dark passage. It looked similar to the previous hallway, with no people or beasts in sight. If the floor hadn't been stone, we might have found footprints. As we entered the passage, the door closed on its own behind us—perhaps a spring mechanism. Our footsteps echoed loudly as we walked with our lights held high. Eventually, we reached a similar door. I pushed it open cautiously. This room was smaller than the last but still circular.

There was a door to the left, but nothing else—except for a small stone statue of a goblin with its head tilted, sitting on a cylindrical pedestal in the center. It looked suspicious no matter how you sliced it. I didn't get the feeling the statue would move and attack if I got close, but still.

"Magrid, be absolutely sure to watch out for traps."

"Yeah! I know!"

Despite his energetic reply, I walked up to the pedestal. Near the statue, there was a button with large letters that read, 'PUSH?'

"It's a question?!" I yelled.

At the same time as my retort, I delivered a sharp chop to the goblin statue's head! Thump! The statue sank slightly into the pedestal and then popped back up. It wasn't the button—the goblin statue itself was the switch!

By the time I realized it, it was too late. A rumbling sound shook the room! The whole place began to vibrate. Was it going to collapse?

"Look, you fell for it too!" Magrid shouted triumphantly.

"This is no time for that! Just get out!" I screamed back, spinning on my heel and running toward the door we came through.

Magrid reached it first and pushed—but it was rejected with a metallic clank!

"It won't open?" he cried in panic.

I arrived at his side just as the shaking stopped. We stood there for a moment. The room hadn't collapsed, but—what a terrifying trap. When I heard Magrid's story, I thought he was an idiot for falling for such a thing, but now that I'd seen it firsthand, the horror really sank in.

By avoiding the obvious button and striking the statue instead, I had triggered the switch. It was a demonic level of psychological warfare! Whoever designed these ruins understood the "tsukkomi" personality perfectly and set traps accordingly! I didn't know what had happened now that the mechanism had triggered, but one thing was clear.

"Anyway, there's no point staying in a room like this," I said, pushing the door.

I expected it to stay shut, but it surprisingly opened inward quite easily. Beyond it was a passage and a beast—“NYAAAAA?!”

We both let out a nonsensical scream and pulled back in a hurry! As soon as I let go, the door closed on its own.

"Magrid! Don't run! Hold the door from the inside!" I shouted as I crouched down and began chanting.

Realizing my intent, Magrid threw his weight against the door. Thud! A heavy sound echoed, and the impact vibrated through the door against my back. The beast was ramming the door from the other side. They could only open these doors by pushing; as long as we held it, we could block them.

However—Thud! The second impact was much stronger. Even while sitting, I was pushed forward slightly. Since the first hit didn't work, it was putting its heart into it now.

"...But that’s all part of the plan!" I finished my spell and signaled Magrid to move away.

The beast's third charge was even more forceful. But this time, Magrid and I weren't there to hold the door! The beast tumbled into the room with its own momentum and struggled to stop. From behind it, I cast my spell.

"Freeze Arrow!"

The cold blast froze the beast solid.

"Now's our chance!"

"Right!"

Magrid and I dove into the passage and ran back to the previous room. Everything looked the same—nothing but doors on the left and right.

"Wait...?" I groaned and stopped.

"What is it?" Magrid asked.

"No, this room..." I looked back and forth between the side doors. "There were supposed to be four doors, weren't there?"

Magrid gasped. Before the statue room, we had passed a circular room that definitely had doors on all four sides. But now, this room only had three: left, right, and the one we came from.

"No way... did a door disappear because of that switch?" Magrid whispered.

I walked over to where the door should have been and checked the wall. There were decorative carvings here too. I wondered if the door was just camouflaged.

"Doesn't look like it..."

"Then what does it mean?"

I had an idea. "Probably... the room rotated."

"The room?!"

I turned to Magrid and nodded. "Identical passages and identical rooms. There's no doubt it's designed to make intruders lose their way. If you think about why the rooms are circular, that’s the answer."

"I see... by rotating the room, it confuses your sense of position."

That shaking earlier—I had worried the room was collapsing, but looking back, it did feel like we were turning.

"So we were led astray."

"That's the most likely scenario. For now, let's go back as far as we can to check," I proposed. He nodded, and we turned back.

"This is the worst..." Magrid muttered sourly.

Realizing the rooms were moving, we went back to the goblin statue room and started searching for a way back. From the first room to the statue room, we had only passed through two others. Logically, we just had to check the rooms and paths one by one to find the original room.

But something designed to confuse intruders wouldn't be that simple. We found a door that wouldn't open, and when I tried to blast it open with a spell, there was nothing but a stone wall behind it.

"Is escape impossible?" Magrid glared at the cold stone wall, gritting his teeth.

"Oh, that's fine," I said, immediately shooting down his concern. "I can use 'Beffis Bring,' a tunnel-digging s

pell. If it comes down to it, we can just dig our way out."

"But! Because the room moved, we don't even know which way we're facing! Even if you dig, you won't know if you're getting closer to the exit or further away!"

His point was valid, but—

"I'll just dig upward," I said, holding up one finger. "I'll dig a tunnel straight up and use Levitation to climb. We'll hit the surface eventually."

Magrid looked completely deflated. "I see. There is that method. I suppose you're right. For a second, I thought we were in a real pinch and got all worked up..."

He sounded almost disappointed. I shrugged.

"Even so, it looks like finding those 'other guests' is going to be a bit of a pain."

Suddenly, a rumbling shook the floor—the same as before! It was rotating! The room was clearly moving counter-clockwise.

"What! Why the room again?!" Magrid cried, stumbling.

This room didn't have any traps or switches, yet it moved. The shaking stopped. Beyond the door I had blasted open—where there had been a wall—a passage now appeared.

"Probably... those ruin thieves touched a mechanism that moves the rooms... it seems switches don't just move the room they are in," I sighed.

"What a troublesome gimmick," Magrid agreed.

"Tell me about it. Besides the rotation, there are beast releases and probably other traps. To navigate this place, we have to distinguish between the rotation switches and the other stuff, and use only the rotation ones to move. Ugh, how annoying!"

Even if I figured out the logic, mapping this place would be a nightmare. Just thinking about it made me want to give up, and I scratched my head in frustration.

"Well, no point grumbling. Let's head forward for now," Magrid said, full of motivation. Since he was the boss, I had to go along with it.

"Fine, shall we try this way?" I said somewhat resignedly, pointing toward the passage that had just opened up.

But the voice that returned to me was "Icicle Lance!" It was an attack spell cast by a sorcerer! At that moment, a light appeared. It was a straight corridor, and through the open door at the end, several figures were standing!

"So, you've shown yourselves, ruin thieves!" I could not see the people in the back clearly, but the one in the lead was a man dressed as a sorcerer in a robe and cloak. He held a stick aloft in one hand, making the magical light shine. Magrid-san, standing behind me, raised a voice of surprise as he apparently recognized the face! "—Louis!? Is that you, Louis?"

Before I could even shout a warning, I delivered a single kick! "Kebabu!?" With a strange cry, Magrid-san went flying sideways from the front of the passage! Using the recoil, I jumped to the opposite side as the attack spell fired by the sorcerer streaked past! The spear of cold air pierced the room and struck the opposite wall, causing ice to cling to it! Immediately after dodging the blow, I peered into the passage while

chanting a spell under my breath. But by then, the opponent was no longer at the end of the passage, and only the sound of several receding footsteps remained.

I thought about giving chase, but if the room-rotating mechanism activated again while I was separated from Magrid-san, there was a high risk we would become lost.

For now, I turned my eyes toward Magrid-san as he shakily pulled himself up and asked, "An acquaintance?" He had called the opponent 'Louis.' If so, they must be someone he knew.

He picked up the stick that served as his torch while agitation showed in his eyes. ".....Yes. The sorcerer in the lead... is none other than my subordinate. When I investigated this place before, he was one of the people who accompanied me, named Louis.

But I never imagined that he would be part of a band of ruins thieves...!" He slammed his fist against the wall. I gave a small sigh and said, ".....I'm sure being betrayed by someone you know is a shock... well, don't get too depressed. These things happen sometimes in this world." ".....You don't seem surprised," he remarked. "More or less," I replied with a small shrug of my shoulders.

To be honest, I had already predicted the possibility that sorcerers from Vait City were involved with the ruins thieves. Rather than the coincidence of thieves finding a ruin just as the Sorcerers' Association's investigation was suspended, it was much more likely that one of the sorcerers involved in the excavation had been blinded by greed and was trying to grab the treasure by teaming up with some random thugs.

For researcher-type sorcerers, there is no such thing as having "too much" funding. Of course, such a story wouldn't be interesting to Magrid-san, so I didn't say it out loud. "So? What are we going to do? Now that you know it's an acquaintance."

"What do you mean 'what'? Because it's an acquaintance, that means I'll have to stop him even more so! No matter what, I'll make him stop this! Will you help me, Lina-kun?" Magrid-san answered my question without even a hint of hesitation.

That was a pretty good answer. I flashed a small smile. "Okay. Besides, I had to deal with the beasts anyway. Just because some ruins thieves are added to the mix doesn't really change anything."

"For someone so energetic, you certainly leave the work to others!" To my reflexive retort, he shouted back with his usual vigor, "Of course! Let me tell you, Lina-kun, people at the top of an organization are generally like that!" "Wow, he actually said it!" I thought he was wrong, but it wasn't necessarily a total mistake; however, I didn't think it was a good idea for a high-ranking person to say that in public.

"......Well then—" I began stepping into the passage ahead while chanting a spell. Magrid-san followed along with me. After advancing a short distance, I stopped and turned around— "Demona Crystal!" A massive block of ice filled the room at my single shot! "......What are you doing?"

To Magrid-san, who asked with knitted brows, I replied, "I'm blocking the paths." I continued, "Even if we chase them, it's no fun to cross paths or get caught in a pincer attack with the beasts. If I block the rooms we've passed through with ice like this, it serves as a marker and limits the movement of those guys and the beasts, right?" Breaking the walls or ceilings would be a more certain way to stop them, but it would also damage the ruins and carry the risk of causing a cave-in.

In that regard, ice serves as a barrier, and if left alone, it will simply melt away without damaging the ruins. I explained this as I moved further down the passage. "Oh, and also. From now on, proceed with more caution than before. The ruins thieves will probably try to silence us."

"Silence us...!" At my casual words, Magrid-san reflexively stopped in his tracks. "N-No, I mean, Louis...! No matter what, he wouldn't go that far...!" He hurriedly moved his feet to keep up slightly behind me. I shrugged.

"I think he just reflexively fired the spell he was chanting for the beast countermeasures... anyway, the opponent fired an attack spell the moment you called his name. In other words, he's in a situation where he can't turn back anymore. At least Louis—was that it?—he and his companions probably think so. If that's the case, the actions they should take are either to quietly admit their crimes, or to silence us who are here now.

They might run and hide, but if they choose a path other than silencing us, they'd have to give up on the treasure here. Louis aside, I doubt his companions would accept that. Thinking about it that way, it's highly likely the opponent will resort to rough measures. In any case, my point is you can't let your guard down."

".....Yeah. I understand." Magrid-san nodded with a serious face. And so, we continued further down the passage. I no longer knew how many doors I had broken or how many rooms I had filled with ice.

"But... just how large are these ruins...?" Magrid-san muttered wearily after my cold spell had frozen yet another beast we encountered. This was the fifth beast we had defeated. Yet, despite advancing this far, we had not encountered the ruins thieves again, nor was there any sign of the end of the ruins.

"Even if you say it's wide, it's not like it expands infinitely. We're definitely cornering them." My words were partly to convince myself. After this much of the same situation, even I was getting fed up.

Each room was not particularly large, and each passage was straight. Such structures just went on and on and on. I advanced, blocked a room with ice, and advanced again. Occasionally, I struck down a beast we met. If the beasts had been stronger, I might have felt some tension, but for me, they were easy opponents... well, of course, I wasn't wishing for a formidable enemy.

How should I put it? I couldn't deny the feeling that it was a repetition of simple labor. It was enough to make one sick of it. And of course, along the way, there were several trap rooms. Mechanisms to rotate the rooms or other different traps.

There were statues and such, and near the buttons were parades of comments just waiting for a retort, such as: "Based on a comprehensive assessment, it was not determined that pressing this would necessarily lead to a favorable result," or "This is the Button of Happiness. Mickey-san, who pressed it, succeeded in business and became popular with the opposite sex! Now you can have this Button of Happiness for just two silver coins a press!" or "Press it if you want to press it. But that won't stop me!"

Naturally, neither Magrid-san nor I would fall for such things anymore. We overcame everything without issue, sometimes biting our lips to endure the pain when we wanted to make a retort, or one of us snapping the other back to their senses with a double-slap when they were about to waver.

"But isn't there a possibility that Louis and the others have actually fled this ruin long ago?" It would have been easy to nod at his suggestion and propose leaving the ruins, but that would solve nothing.

"I won't say the possibility is zero, but... since we and those guys are each moving the room-rotating mechanism once at a time, it's more likely they're still wandering around nearby, lost. .....Well, I'll continue a bit longer, and if we still don't meet them—" I cut off my words there.

Magrid-san also stopped moving, about to ask what was wrong. I heard voices. The voices of multiple people arguing. The place we were in now was a circular room not much different from the others. In the center stood the beast I had just frozen, now a statue, and there were four doors in the four directions of the room. With our backs to the door we entered, the voices came from beyond the door to the right.

"That's why I'm saying I hate gloomy stuff like ruin diving—" With that voice, the door opened, and the man who stepped in stopped in his tracks. He was likely surprised to see the frozen beast—but this was the very moment I had been waiting for.

Kicking off the floor, I lunged forward and released the spell I had been chanting! "Blam Blazer!" "Chhh….!" The shockwave of blue light that was born streaked straight toward the warrior-like man standing in the doorway!

Instead of dodging to the side, the man pulled back into the passage and pulled the door shut to use as a shield! Did he read that if he dodged, it would hit his companions behind him? Not a bad judgment! But! The blue light slammed into the door that served as a shield—

"Guh!" "Gah!" "Ah!?" Several screams overlapped at once! Sorry, but I'm one step ahead! The spell I cast is one where the blue light shockwave passes through various objects while dealing damage to both the target's spirit and physical body. The light passed through the door-shield and pierced the people lined up straight in the passage! Just as I thought I had wiped them all out in one fell swoop—

".....T-That was...!" "Retreat for now!" "But Gomez is...!" "Leave him!" I heard several voices and many footsteps. I hadn't finished them off! While hurriedly chanting the next spell, I made a dash for the door!

I pushed the door with my hand, but it only moved slightly before transmitting a heavy resistance—realizing someone was stuck behind it, I pulled it open this time. A man in warrior attire lay slumped there. He was the man who had shown his face earlier and immediately pulled back.

I fired a single shot. While it had piercing power, its lethal capacity wasn't high. Even a direct hit would only cause someone to faint for a while.

I wondered if I had failed to hit everyone directly, or if the power had significantly diminished the moment it pierced the door and the lead man. Just as I turned back to open the door I had come through, a massive vibration shook the room!

"I'm going after them!"

"A... Ah!" At my call, Magrid-san finally leaped out from the shadow of the beast and ran toward me. Once I confirmed that, I dashed toward the end of the passage while chanting an attack spell under my breath. Was it that way? I ran through the door, only to find another room that looked exactly the same.

There were doors in all four directions again, and the one on the left was shaking! I rushed to the door, sensing for what lay ahead, and pulled it open! It was another passage. I still couldn't see my opponents, but I knew they must have gone this way!

Just as I was about to dive in, I realized something. The room was rotating! Those ruin thieves must have used that mechanism to spin the room! Before long, the room stopped moving. But by then, I had no idea which way I was facing anymore.

"What are we going to do now?! They used some weird attack spell, and thanks to that, Gomez got taken out! This isn't what we agreed on!"

"Calm down. Panicking won't solve anything." A man’s voice rebuked the hysterical woman's voice. Even in that man’s voice, there was no hint of composure. Then, another man’s voice spoke up.

"Regardless... we activated the mechanism to move the rooms. This should buy us at least a little time. We'll devise a plan in the meantime."

Ho ho. So you think you still have time, do you?” *Thump!* "Too bad! Ice Arrow!" I kicked the door open and unleashed my spell! Caught completely off guard, three of them instantly turned into ice statues! The large man on the left, who looked like a typical bandit, took a direct hit from the cold spell.

Their screams echoed a moment later. It was another similar room: doors on four sides, and a pedestal in the center with a dragon statue and a switch. Of course, without even thinking, I knew it was the device used to rotate the rooms.

It seemed the ruin thieves—Lewis and his gang—were leisurely planning to start a strategy meeting in this room. And this was the result. Magrid-san appeared from behind me.

"Impossible! How did you reach this room so quickly?!"

The mage-like man, Lewis, cried out in surprise from the opposite side of the pedestal. The only other person unharmed, a lightly equipped woman, hurriedly rushed to Lewis's side. She looked like a hunter. Perhaps because her companions had been taken out so easily, her knees were completely shaking.

Magrid-san had apparently slowed down because she was worried about the man I'd knocked out with my spell, but she showed up at the door immediately after the room finished rotating. Naturally, that meant the door to the left was where Lewis and the others had fled. Chasing them was no trouble at all.

"Lewis... why would you do something like being a ruin thief... why?"

At Magrid-san's question, the mage's mouth twisted.

"The Vice-Chairperson wouldn't understand... what it's like to struggle for research funds..."

So that was the motive after all. As Lewis let out a self-deprecating laugh, Magrid-san spoke in a troubled voice. Lewis seemed to think he had bought time by rotating the room, but I had to point out the obvious.

"The reason you don't have a sponsor for your research is because you're doing something nonsensical like studying sea cucumbers..."

"Sea cucumbers?! You mean the ones in the ocean?"

"Don't mock sea cucumbers!" As I reflexively asked, Lewis's voice flared with anger.

"You don't understand me... no, you don't understand sea cucumbers either! For five years! I have spent five years researching sea cucumbers, and finally! Only one more step! Just one more step!"

He was only one step away? From what? I wondered if his research was aimed at the discovery that they're a bit of a delicacy when eaten with vinegar. I thought about

telling him that in some regions people have been eating sea cucumbers since forever, but for now, I decided to keep quiet because I felt sorry for him.

"Do you... really have to do this...?" At Magrid-san's groan, Lewis opened his mouth.

"Yes,But! Even to bring sea cucumbers safely to this place so far from the sea, I need funds! There was no other way!"

Suddenly, a door on the side banged open—and a single beast appeared! Everyone froze for a second. I was the first to snap out of it. Perhaps that drew its attention, because the beast let out a roar! I began chanting a spell in my mind. Acting like it had some tactical sense, the beast thrust its head forward and let out a cry. But that little bit of cleverness was its undoing! While the beast wasted time with useless movements, my spell was complete!

"Ice Arrow!"

The strike I unleashed encased the beast in ice! In that instant, Lewis spun on his heel and dived into a nearby door! Hey, did you think I'd let you get away after coming this far?!

"Blue Magic Violent Blast!"

The shockwave of blue light headed straight for the backs of Lewis and his group as they fled down the passage!

"Kafuh!"

Just as it was about to strike, the light hit the back of the woman running behind. The light passed through her and lunged for Lewis's back. Lewis reached the next door, dove in recklessly, and went straight to the left! The strike only grazed Lewis's back, piercing through the empty air! Tch! So close! I started chanting my next spell as I gave chase!

"Struggling for funds is one thing... but you must know that breaking into a ruin scheduled for investigation by the Association is unforgivable!"

"I know that! But now that things have come to this, there's no turning back! Sylvie, you know what to do!"

I lunged into the room! With the pedestal between us, the beast and I glared at each other—

"Eh...! Wait...!"

But! The woman hurriedly followed after him! The beast turned its head toward me! While chanting my next spell, I pressed on after Lewis and the others. Magrid-san followed right along with me.

The beast let out a roar like a strange bird! However, even though the possibility was low, there was a danger that the enemy was planning an ambush. I couldn't just jump through the door carelessly.

Overwhelmed, Magrid-san and Lewis's group backed away! I kicked off the floor, using the pedestal in the middle of the room as a shield against the beast. Reacting to my movement, the beast also slowly advanced.

I couldn't just dive in. While sensing what lay ahead, I opened the door, ran, and passed through the next room. Because I was being cautious, my pace inevitably slowed. The distance between us wouldn't shrink at all. But, just as I entered the next passage, my spell was complete!

For now, I ignored the woman who was probably unconscious! From one room to the next passage. I kicked open the door to the next room—and as soon as I entered, the scenery changed completely. It was a room clearly different from the others. No, it might be better to call it a hall rather than a room. It was a vast, hollow, square space. Standing there in a daze was Lewis's back.

Beyond him, at the end of his gaze, was an incredibly large stone door carved with a giant human face. Was this the center of the ruins? Not just Lewis, but I, and Magrid-san who arrived slightly late, instinctively stopped in our tracks. There seemed to be some kind of light behind the stone door, as light was leaking through the cracks.

"Is this... it...?"

Magrid-san's dazed murmur was cut off by Lewis’s quiet voice. Without turning around, he spoke.

"Could we hold off on settling things until after we've seen what's inside? Even though things have turned out like this, we are both mages seeking knowledge. To fall without seeing what lies ahead would be a tragedy."

His voice had a certain enlightened ring to it. It seemed he had made up his mind. However!

Who would listen to that?! This could be a trick to lure me into lowering my guard!

"It's... not locked..." He glanced back over his shoulder and whispered. I frowned in doubt. A door like this, and it’s not locked? Isn’t this the heart of the ruins? Or is it some kind of trap?

Just before I could release the spell I had prepared, Magrid-san stepped forward and raised his hand as if to block me. I had no choice but to nod silently. Lewis couldn't have seen it, but he began to walk slowly.

Magrid-san and I followed at a slight distance toward the giant stone door. You're too soft, Magrid-san! Lewis put his strength into his hands. I thought about it, but if I fired a spell now, it would hit Magrid-san and might not even hit Lewis.

Rumble... rumble rumble... The door opened toward the back with a heavy sound, surprisingly easily, and a dazzling light poured in. Of course, I kept my spell ready so I could attack immediately if Lewis tried anything funny.

Perhaps checking for traps, Lewis examined the carvings on the surface for a while before putting his hands on the door. Everyone instinctively held their breath at the sight that spread out before them. Birds were singing. White clouds in a blue sky. The sunlight illuminated the bare earth. A little distance away, a middle-aged man in a hat and work clothes was weeding the grass.

"What... is this...?"

It was only a moment later that I realized the voice murmuring those words was my own. The wide, bare ground was surrounded by stone seats. It was almost like—

"Oh. Who are you folks?" The man who had been weeding noticed us and walked over with a leisurely voice. His straw hat suited him incredibly well.

"Oh. Um." Magrid-san stood there with his eyes wide.

"What is this place?" Lewis continued.

"What do you mean 'what'?"

Ah. I knew it. The man in the straw hat stopped and looked at us with an exasperated expression.

"You can tell just by looking, can't you? It's a colosseum."

I had a feeling from the looks of it. "Eh? A colosseum? Eh? But..."

To the confused Lewis, the man spoke as if explaining to a child. "Like I said. This is a colosseum King Kalmato had built. The unveiling is a little ways off, though."

King Kalmato built this? I frowned in silence.

"But… it's underground..."

"Yeah. It's quite something, isn't it? If you cross one mountain over from where you entered the ruins, you're at the Royal Capital."

Magrid-san muttered something under his breath, pointing over his shoulder toward where we had come from.

"You can use this plaza like a normal colosseum, and it's also set up so you can hold various competitions using that ruin-style maze over there."

"Ruin-style," Magrid-san whispered, his face now completely twitching. If it was "ruin-style," that meant it wasn't a real ruin. Whether he knew our turmoil or not, the straw-hat man spoke proudly, as if it were his own achievement.

"I hear you can even watch what's happening inside from the spectator seats using magic. There are all sorts of gimmicks, and although I haven't seen them, they even went so far as to ask the mages in the capital to prepare rival animals called 'Chimeras.' It's really something. But—if you didn't know all that, did you somehow wander in from somewhere?"

Magrid-san and Lewis looked at each other in silence. I finally understood the situation. I see... so that's how it is.

It would normally be impossible for a large-scale mechanism to work without issues in a long-undiscovered ruin buried in the earth, or for creatures like beasts to be wandering around in a place with no food. I had wondered if it meant architectural

technology that could keep mechanisms moving after a long time and magical technology that could preserve scrolls alive.

"Ah…" I wore a tired, bitter smile. "This labyrinth digs quite far into the mountain, doesn't it? There was a small landslide, and part of the labyrinth was exposed—it seems we just assumed it was a ruin."

Groans escaped the mouths of both Magrid-san and Lewis at the same time. I see... I thought the beasts were a bit weak for guard dogs...

"What?!" If they were synthetic beasts made for competition, then I guess that explains it.

"Then... what about the treasure!" At Lewis's cry, the straw-hat man let out a laugh.

"So, you thought it was a real ruin? That's too bad. The treasure will apparently be placed as prizes once the unveiling is over and the competitions begin. If you participate in the games and do your best, you might get some."

"Eeeeeeeeh..." Lewis collapsed to his knees on the spot. On the other hand, Magrid-san, while showing some signs of agitation, came over to my side.

"Lina-kun... what should we do about this situation?" Of course, the answer was already decided. I looked up at the blue sky and said, "As long as I get my commission fee, I don't care."

"Eeeeeeeeh!" Magrid-san let out a cry similar to Lewis's in response. The incident was over. Well, at least as far as I was concerned. There were a mountain of difficult problems, like rescuing Lewis's companions, the compensation for breaking the labyrinth and defeating the beasts, and the punishment for Lewis and his gang. Since I didn't want to get involved in anything tedious, I forced my commission fee out of them and left quickly.

I continued my journey alone, avoiding the Royal Capital of Kalmato, while thinking that Magrid-san must be having a very hard time right now under this same sky.

(The Dancing Labyrinth: End)

The Legend of The Gold Bug

I was walking alone down the road when, suddenly, men armed with weapons jumped out in front of me. They closed in, demanding my money. It was a common sight for a traveler—the "scenery" of the road, so to speak. At first, that was exactly what I thought it was.

But then...

".....Are you a traveler.....?"

One of the men let out a bewildered voice the moment he laid eyes on me. Some of them remained on guard, not letting their hair down. They weren't wearing armor or helmets; instead, they looked like they were dressed for fieldwork. Their faces showed desperation, but they lacked the sheer malice typical of bandits.

...Still, even if it was certain they weren't bandits, if I were asked to identify a group equipped with kettles and bedsheets, I would have been a little hard-pressed for an answer. For the time being, I decided there was no need to blow them away. I dispelled the spell I had been chanting and opened my mouth.

"What on earth did you think I was?"

I was dressed in my sorcerer style—bandana and black cloak—and I had been walking right down the highway. What else could I possibly look like other than a traveling sorcerer?

The moment I spoke, the tension left the men’s shoulders all at once.

"It talked."

"It’s a traveler. It talked."

"Phew. Gave me a scare....."

But the fact they muttered that meant they had mistaken me for something else entirely. As they grumbled to each other, they began retreating back behind the rocks and into the thickets where they had been hiding.

"Wait just a minute! I’m asking you what you meant by that!"

The misunderstanding had been on my side as well. I had sensed an ambush and, assuming it was bandits, I had already finished chanting an attack spell under my breath.

However, the men in front of me didn't seem to be that sort of crowd. Their weapons were just sticks and lit torches. I didn't quite get it, but they were also carrying kettles and bedsheets.

As I raised my voice, the men stopped moving.

"Ah. Sorry. We got the wrong person. Don't take it personally."

The one who spoke was the man holding a kettle. In situations like this, the leader usually does the talking... but the leader's weapon of choice was a kettle?

I took a closer look at him. He looked to be around twenty years old. Though he wasn't exactly sophisticated, he was a fairly handsome guy. Black hair peeked out from the towel wrapped around his head, and he had another towel draped politely around his neck.

Despite the lingering summer heat being brutal, he wore a long-sleeved work outfit. Sometimes people wear those in the mountains or grasslands to avoid bug bites and scratches, but... the kettle in his right hand remained a mystery. From the atmosphere, it didn't seem like it just held water.

"You’ve got the wrong person, Wouldn’t ya say? You're acting awfully ominous for a mistake." I asked, though he seemed strangely hesitant.

"Well..... I mean..... we’re just keeping a lookout for crop thieves....."

Crop thieves. That word made something click in my head.

"Does that happen to mean—you're protecting the Panon fruit?"

The men became visibly unsettled by my hunch. It seemed I had hit the bullseye.

The Panon fruit. There was no need for a detailed explanation; everyone knew it. To put it nicely, it was popular; to put it bluntly, it was nothing rare.

I had heard it didn't grow well in the sandy soil of the Elmekian Empire, but generally, it was everywhere, and any local eatery would have its juice on the menu.

However, when it came to the truly delicious ones, that was a different story.

Depending on the weather and the soil, the quality of the crop could vary wildly even for the same fruit. Apparently, fruit thieves had been appearing to target the highest quality Panons. The ones grown around here were exceptionally tasty and often delivered to royalty and nobility.

This was a huge chance for me!

According to rumors, these Panons were far beyond the usual taste! They were said to have a sweetness and aroma so strong—yet never cloying—that once you tasted them, you could never go back to regular Panons! Hearing a story like that, it was only human nature to want to try one!

However, most of the top-tier Panons were bought up by nobles or high-end restaurants with connections. Even if you piled up the cash, a commoner couldn't easily get their hands on them. But, if I went directly to the production area during harvest, there was a good chance I could get my hands on "damaged" ones—fruits with scratches that tasted the same but couldn't be sold as merchandise.

Since I could use attack spells, I figured they wouldn't lose anything by hiring me. That was the convenient logic I used to justify my detour to this famous region.

"How about I help you out? With the thiever… er… I mean… hunting, I mean."

At my proposal, the men exchanged looks. I didn't miss the opening and pressed on.

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. As you can see, I'm a traveling sorcerer. I'd heard rumors that delicious Panons were grown around here, so I figured those thieves might be after them."

The men looked at each other and nodded in unison. "We can't pay much in gold... but as for the Panons, we can give you as many as you want of the ones that are scratched or misshapen.

I guarantee the taste, regardless of how they look. If that's alright with you, please, help us. I should have introduced myself sooner. I'm Dire, from the village of Thune just ahead."

My concerns had been for nothing. Kettle-man—Dire—said it so easily I felt a bit deflated.

"Well, my pockets have been getting a little light lately. If you'll treat me to those delicious Panons, I'll keep the commission fee low."

I said it with a joking tone at the end. I had to make sure my true goal—the Panons—didn't seem too obvious.

After that, I followed Dire to the village of Thune and spoke with the village chief. To be honest, the part about my pockets being empty was a lie.

"Don't let your guard down. Those guys are much smarter than we think."Dire told me this after we left the chief's house. The village was surrounded by orchards. Everywhere I looked, Panon fruits were ripening, each one carefully wrapped in a mesh bag.

There were other trees mixed in that weren't Panon trees, but they didn't look like mere brush. They were likely some clever trick to make the Panons taste better.

In various spots around the orchards, men with long poles stood watch with sharp eyes. If they went to this much trouble to grow them, just how good did these fruits taste? But because of that taste, they were targeted by thieves. The struggle between the villagers and the thieves had likely been going on for years.

"I get it. I won't be careless. If for no other reason than to make sure my share doesn't decrease."

Following the discussion with the chief, my fee was settled on a "performance-based" arrangement. If I protected the fruit perfectly, the pay would be higher and I'd get as many top-class Panons as possible. If I failed repeatedly and—heaven forbid—every single fruit was taken, I'd have to accept that they couldn't give what they didn't have.

"So, what's the thieves' usual method?"

"They mostly move at night. But that doesn't mean they won't strike during the day. Sometimes they come right down the highway, disguised as travelers. That's why we were watching the road... at first, I thought you were one of them."

"I see. That makes things simple."

As we spoke, we began to run. I looked around. The orchards were vast, and the rows of trees were perfect hiding spots. In the dim light of night, finding a hidden opponent would be no easy feat. On the other hand, if I used some method to light up the area, it might negatively affect the growth of the fruit.

While I was mulling over various strategies in my head—

"—Dire!"

A man came running from the village entrance, out of breath. He was one of the men who had stood in my way earlier, still flapping his sheets.

"They're here! It's them this time!"

The man shouted as he ran. Dire and I exchanged a look.

"Lina! Get a fire or ice attack spell ready! Something flashy!"

He was totally ready to blow them away. He really was quick to get to the point!

"Roger that!"

I answered and began my incantation. We retraced our steps back toward the road I had come in on. Soon, a scene very similar to my own arrival played out ahead.

Villagers stood blocking the path, clutching their strange weapons. A single figure stood on the road. The only difference was that this time, I was on the villagers' side. And the figure standing there was blatantly suspicious.

They were completely wrapped in a black cloak that reached their feet, with a hood of the same color pulled down low. The "black" wasn't just a plain matte fabric, but had a unique color and sheen. Because of the distance and the deep hood, I couldn't see their face or even tell if they were a man or a woman.

"—I'm just asking if you're a traveler!" I heard a similar line to the one I'd been given.

"I said, answer me!" The villager’s voice rose in pitch. At that moment, Dire, running beside me, whispered:

"—Lina, the spell."

I instinctively furrowed my brows. He was telling me to blast an attack spell at this distance, having already judged the person to be a thief. It felt like a much harsher response than I had received... Of course, I could just attack as told, and if there was a problem, I could just make the excuse, "But Dire told me to do it."

The spell I had prepared was Freeze Brid. When the fired light sphere hit, it would freeze the surroundings. If I fired it now, there was a chance it might hit a villager or miss the figure entirely. I thought I should close the distance a bit more.

In the split second I hesitated: "You! I knew it!" One of the impatient villagers swung his club at the shadow in front of him!

"Stop!" Dire's shout was too late. The swinging club buried itself into the black figure.

At that instant— With a dry clack, the figure shattered!

"—Wha...?" I let out a cry, forgetting for a moment that I was mid-incantation. The shattered shadow turned into countless tiny pebbles, scattering in all directions.

"Ah! Damn it!"

"The sheets! Where are the sheets?!"

"Idiot! We don't have them here!" The villagers scrambled to ward off the flying grains. Some flew toward us, and Dire swatted one away with his bare hand. Before long, the grains vanished into the air without even hitting the ground. There was nothing left where the figure had stood.

I stopped in my tracks, staring blankly at the scene. "Lina! Why didn't you use your spell then?!" I finally snapped back to reality at the sound of Dire's accusing voice.

"Wait, wait, wait. I mean, what was that just now?" When I asked, he looked at me as if I were stating the obvious.

"I told you, it's the fruit thieves."

"No, no. There is no such thing as a fruit thief who shatters and vanishes without a trace." As I waved my hands in denial, Dire frowned. Then, as if realizing something, he spoke.

"Oh. Could it be, Lina, that you've got the wrong idea?"

".....The wrong idea?" He nodded at my suspicious look.

"Come to think of it, I might have been a bit lacking in my explanation. The fruit thieves we're fighting aren't human."

"Eh?" Dire held out his right fist and slowly opened it. Inside was one of the "pebbles" he had caught earlier.

It was, without a doubt...

"It's a drone beetle." There was a legend.

About two years ago, a single wandering drone beetle drifted into this land. With its power and talent, it instantly organized—or swallowed up—the beetles of the entire area. It achieved a unification of neighboring beetles that no one had ever accomplished before. This talented wandering beetle became a conqueror, a living legend.

But the legend didn't end there. Emboldened by their great leader, the beetles easily brushed aside the stag beetles and hornets that had previously acted like they owned the place. Seeking further prosperity and a stable food supply, they finally set their sights on the human orchards—

Dire went on and on with this nonsense for a long time.
"---Um, excuse me." I don't know how long my mind went blank.

"A drone beetle... You mean a 'gold bug,' like an insect?"

"Of course." Dire answered, holding out his palm. Inside was a single beetle. Whether it was dead from the shock of being caught or just unconscious, it didn't move a muscle.

I waved my hands frantically. "No. Absolutely not. There's no such thing as a beetle like that." I mean, obviously.

"But you saw it just now, didn't you? The beetles gathered together to disguise themselves as a traveler." When Dire asked me that, I had no comeback. He let out a sigh.

"Still, I suppose it’s harsh to blame only you. For a city person who doesn't know much about bugs, I guess it was unexpected."

"No. It's not a matter of being a 'city person' or 'not knowing about bugs'..."

My mutter didn't seem to reach his ears.

"I'll admit my explanation was lacking and our coordination was poor. Next time, let's do it right."

"Originally, the plan was to wrap the opponent in a sheet and finish them off with boiling water, but..." Ah. So that explained the weird equipment. I still hadn't quite accepted that strange scarab beetle legend, though... While I was busy being confused, the monstrosity completely ignored the villagers and strode through the orchard.

"Wait, there’s no way a scarab beetle like that exists!" I shook my head violently and instantly switched my focus. How should I even describe that thing? I instinctively shouted a retort at it, but it wasn't as if the mass of beetles in front of me was going to vanish just because I yelled. Out of a black sphere roughly the size of a small room, countless things—I couldn't tell if they were arms or legs—grew haphazardly.

Pyuririi!

The limbs either stomped against the earth to push the massive body forward or reached up to snatch and pull the Panon fruits into itself one after another. Suddenly, the sharp sound of a whistle echoed! The villagers spun around as if they had been struck.

"The village!" the men on lookout shouted. They gallantly struck at the thing's limbs with the sticks they held, but it didn't look like their attacks were doing anything. "Dammit! Was that a diversion!?"

A diversion, huh? Leaving the beetle business aside, it was a fact that the whistle came from the direction of the village. Something must have happened, and the men guarding the orchard were signaling us.

"Let's go!" There was no reason to argue with Dire’s call. We all went running back down the path toward the village!

There it was. Though the villagers were trying their best to resist, their efforts didn't seem to be working. The moment they struck, the monster’s limbs tore away easily, but as soon as the sticks passed through, the pieces stuck back together and returned to normal just as easily.

A pure Demon. That sinister possibility flashed through my mind for an instant. But no, it was different. When I looked closely at the monster’s coloring, it was exactly what I had seen just a moment ago. That unique, glossy black. It was the same as that "traveler-mimic" that appeared on the road—a mixture of the colors from a scarab beetle's outer and inner wings! Yes! This thing was also formed from countless beetles gathered together!

Just as there are plenty of irrational humans in the world, it shouldn't be strange for there to be irrational beetles! Well, it was strange! But whatever! While I was thinking, the beetle collective was swallowing Panon fruits one after another! That meant my share was decreasing! No matter what, I couldn't forgive that!

"You damn bugs! If you'd just stayed quiet and sucked on tree sap, you wouldn't have had to fight me!" I ran across the ground, closing the distance to the beetle collective while chanting a spell under my breath.

"Freeze Arrow!"

The moment the target entered my range, the spell was complete! Without a shred of hesitation, I released the magic. Over a dozen arrows of cold air lunged forward and pierced the black sphere. A direct hit with every single one!

I thought the black mass would instantly turn into a block of ice. But then—Bwah! With a roar of wings that vibrated through the air, the monster transformed into countless small projectiles! What!? A dozen or so chunks of ice fell heavily to the ground.

I realized then: the beetles had dispersed the moment my spell hit, minimizing the damage.

"I owe you my thanks, Lina-san," Dire said. We had driven them off, but if we caused damage to the orchard in the process, we'd be putting the cart before the horse.

But there had to be a way. No matter how "un-beetle-like" they were, they were still beetles; there had to be a weakness.

"...Even so, it makes no difference. I'm grateful for what you did. To protect the Panon fruits..." The relief and trust were visible on the men's faces. For now, I had killed a decent number of them, but we were far from total extermination.

"Not yet. If they come again, I'll just keep blasting them!" I started to chant the next spell—but at that moment, the scattered projectiles didn't regroup. Instead, they retreated in all directions. The clumps I could see here and there were probably groups of beetles transporting the Panon fruits they had snatched earlier! Tsk! They were good at retreating, too! I released my spell, but in the end, I only managed to destroy about two of the groups carrying fruit.

I slowly shook my head left and right. "Rather than saying we defeated them, we just made them retreat. That means those guys will definitely attack again. We should come up with a countermeasure before that."

At my suggestion, Dire and the villagers looked at each other. "...But... how...?"

"Actually, for me, well..." I didn't have a clear answer either. Fire is effective for killing small, numerous insects, but if I used it carelessly in the wrong place, I'd cause a forest fire.

"They say 'the classics' are classics because their effectiveness is guaranteed. If this doesn't work, we just have to find another way... Oh. Lower your voice." As I spoke, the two of us headed toward the place where we had set the traps.

When you think of a trap for scarab beetles, it goes without saying: a mixture of honey, crushed spoiled Panon fruits, and brandy to make the scent stronger, combined with birdlime. We had smeared it on various trees a little distance from the orchard to catch them all in one go.

The others had reacted to my words with expressions of anxiety, but they still nodded firmly. It was the kind of trick kids often use to catch stag beetles, but it should have been effective against these beetles too. The mountain morning was a bit cold, and the morning mist surrounding us weakened the light.

Though I was the one who suggested it, even I had my doubts about whether such a simple trick would work. Even if it went well, it wouldn't wipe them all out.

However, if we could reduce their numbers significantly, it was worth doing. In the morning mist, the two of us walked along the mountain path with poor visibility.

"...Do you think it'll work? A trick like this?" Dire asked.

"It should be worth at least trying," I replied.

Eventually, through the white world of mist, the tree where we set the trap came into view. I exhausted my intellect to set a trap for beetles... and as a result, the beetles didn't get caught at all.

"Heh... so that's how it is."

Attached to the tree was a large mass of black! Before the tragic reality that Naga had been caught in a trap meant for bugs, I could do nothing but pull weeds in silence.

"Hey! Lina! Don't just stand there, say something!" Even as an irritated Naga raised her voice, my heart remained broken.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I thought it was a strange trap, but to think you were the one who set it! Lina Inverse! What exactly was your intention in doing this? I absolutely must hear the whole story. I'm telling you now, depending on your explanation... you understand, don't you? Now! Don't just crouch there pulling grass, speak up!"

It goes without saying that she was standing there tall and imposing. Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace. Clothes with an unnecessary amount of skin showing. My self-proclaimed rival, Naga the White Serpent—a creature of the same social rank as a scarab beetle.

Somehow, Dire managed to pull himself together and said in a tired voice, "...Uh... how do I put this... we were trying to get rid of the beetles that have been ravaging the Panon fruits around here—"

"Beetles!" At Naga's voice, which cracked completely, I reflexively stopped pulling weeds and looked up. Upon hearing "beetles," Naga’s expression became dead serious. Well, in her case, just because her expression is serious doesn't mean she’s going to say anything serious.

"What about... the beetles?" To the bewildered Dire, Naga fixed her gaze and said, "In other words, you are trying to defeat the beetles, is that right?"

"Uh... yeah. That's right." At his answer, she gave a small nod. In that sense, we weren't enemies... but it seemed what Naga was saying was a bit different.

"What do you mean by that, Naga?" I finally recovered and stood up to ask. Naga gave a small smirk. "Heh. Lina, surely you know? That I boast a deep popularity among jellyfish and green caterpillars."

Ah. Now that she mentioned it, I remembered some story like that. There are rare people called "Beast Masters" who can control specific animals, but Naga can cause a similar phenomenon through her self-proclaimed "popularity." I thought the only things she could control were jellyfish and caterpillars, though.

"...Popularity...?" Beside me, Dire was furrowing his brows, but explaining it was a pain, so I ignored him. "I remember."

Naga nodded. "Just the other day, I received a petition from the caterpillars living in this area! They said the tyranny of the beetles lately has become unbearable!"

"A petition!?" What a bizarre network... or rather, an "insect-work."

"But there's no reason for beetles and caterpillars to be in conflict, right? Their food sources are different," Dire noted, his suspicion being either very sharp or completely off the mark.

Naga laughed it off. "Heh! Your perspective is narrow! I don't know who you are, but listen! Depending on how much foliage the caterpillars eat, the taste of the tree sap and fruit that the beetles eat changes! In other words, for the beetles' gourmet lifestyle, 'population control' over the caterpillars is essential! The beetles claim that the world can only see tomorrow if it is managed and operated by 'chosen' beetles, and they have already begun their rule over the caterpillars!"

"I see!" He actually accepted it! This guy accepted that nonsensical story!

He walked up to Naga. "I'm Dire. For several years, I've been fighting those beetle bastards who ruin the Panon fruits in the village of Tune nearby. I asked Lina-san here for help, and we set a honey trap... but if you're an acquaintance of hers and you're also an enemy of the beetles, then—"

"Heh. It means the time has come to settle things with the beetles!"

And so, the two of them stared each other down boldly and, without a word, firmly shook hands. A joint front between Dire, the representative of the villagers, and Naga, the representative of the caterpillars, was formed! The final battle with the beetles was near!

The Legend of the Gold Bug : The Final Showdown

I've felt the utter helplessness of being human before. Like when the green onions I planted in my balcony planter withered away. Or even worse, when something laid eggs in that soil and a massive swarm of beetle larvae infested it. In those moments, the meaning of powerlessness really soaked into my soul.

But now! I—and Naga—were boldly standing up to that mighty foe, the beetle! Yet, did humans really have a chance at victory? In the next part, **The Legend of the Gold Bug [Part 2]**," I'd have to tell the author to just buy some insecticide at a gardening shop, but for now, I had to hold my tongue and wait!

The Legend of The Gold Bug [Part 2]

Synopsis: I traveled to the mountain village of Tune to eat the highest quality Panon fruits—the kind that never even hits the market. But there, I found a struggle between the villagers and a swarm of fruit-hungry beetles! According to a local youth named Dire, a "stray" beetle that appeared years ago had become King, kicking out rival insects and finally laying waste to the human orchards!

Desperate to eat those Panons, I took on the job of exterminating them. I set a clever honey trap on the tree trunks, but the only thing I caught was my self-proclaimed rival, Naga! After claiming she had been asked for help by caterpillars victimized by the beetles, Naga declared she would join our fight!

Dire's expression clouded over as he spoke of the atrocities committed by the beetles as they ravaged the forest and the village. While he was glad we had formed a united front to stop them, he had one lingering concern.

"So, specifically, how are we going to do this?"

I whispered the question, and Dire, who had been firmly shaking hands with Naga, froze for a moment. In the misty mountains, a bird chirped somewhere in the distance. He let go of her hand, looked at me, and blinked.

"...Eh? What do you mean... 'how'?"

"I mean, it’s all well and good to get fired up about defeating the beetles together, but what are we actually going to do? Naga can use attack spells just like I can, but if we meet the beetles in the orchard and start a huge magical brawl, the Panon trees will be burnt to a crisp. That would be completely pointless, wouldn't it?"

"That... would certainly be putting the cart before the horse..."

To be honest, that was my biggest worry. My "partner" was Naga, after all—a woman who could walk three steps and lose sight of her goals, or even herself. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that a crazed Naga would reduce the Panon trees to ashes along with the beetles. While I was racking my brain trying to figure out a defensive strategy to prevent that...

Naga flipped her hair back with a flourish and looked at me like I was the one being ridiculous. "Wait for them? You must be joking. Honestly, Lina Inverse, that doesn't sound like you at all. We just have to go to their place and wipe them out! Isn't that simple?"

I let out a small sigh at her incredibly carefree opinion. "Right, right... I see. Well, Dire did say the beetles have a King who organizes them. You're right that we just need to take out the leader. But where exactly is this 'King'?"

Naga tilted her head slightly. I expected her to say, "Who knows?" but instead, she answered immediately.

"In the cave deep in the mountains, obviously. If you don't know where it is, I suppose I could lead you there."

"How do you know that!?" Dire and I shouted in unison. Naga acted as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "You want to know how I know? Well, it's quite simple!" She crouched down and picked up a small fallen branch that still had leaves attached. Holding it like a scepter, she began to tell the tale.

Deep in a massive, ancient cave, at the end of a darkness so profound the bottom was unknown... there, their kingdom lay. A low echo, sounding like both a prayer and a curse, was the reverberation of countless wings. Amidst the light reflected off luminous moss, a "Black River" appeared—a path formed as the beetles parted to the left and right.

I watched as the round masses moved in clusters along the path. Suddenly, they came to a halt.

"Norris!"

"Don't come any closer!"

Norris’s scream cut me off as I, Johnny, tried to rush toward him in a panic.

"You must go! Go and tell them about this!"

"B-but...!"

"I'm not going to make it! I'll hold these beetles back here!"

It was true—even to my eyes, the wound Norris had taken was fatal. But still. Even so.

Those masses were actually numerous Panon fruits. Dozens of flower beetles were supporting the fruits, carrying them toward the end of the road. One of the giant insects' right forelegs rose slowly and pointed silently. It pointed directly at the spot where Norris and I were hiding.

"We've been spotted!"

A giant golden insect was there. "Run, kid!"

The buzzing of the beetles' wings grew even more powerful. Faster than words could be spoken, I turned on my heels with Norris, and we dashed toward the cave exit.

"...We hit the jackpot, Johnny." Although we were no match for the flying beetles in terms of speed, we had kept our distance from the start. Before long, the cave exit was in sight.

"Is that... it?"

I, Norris, whispered to the youngster accompanying me while hiding in a corner of that cave.

"Yeah. No mistake. It’s Goba, the 'Drifting Beetle' who united the flower beetles in this area... the self-proclaimed Beetle King. We finally found it. This is their headquarters."

Whether my voice reached Johnny or not, he leaned forward instinctively. Right at his feet, just before he could reach his goal—

"Don't give up, Norris! You have a dream, don't you? You said you were going to become a magnificent Swallowtail butterfly!"

A tiny, tiny pebble rolled away. The sound of whistling wind tore through the void! A violent explosion followed! Before I could even realize it was an attack, Norris and I were sent flying through the air!

"Gwah!"

"W-what was that...?"

Norris gave a fearless grin and said, "It looks like this is the end for me. You become a fine Hawk Moth in my place. Now go! Hurry!"

The buzzing of the approaching beetles mingled with Norris's shouting.

"You have something you must do! Don't let my death be in vain! Go and report to Lady Naga!"

The buzzing intensified. I pushed myself up after being blown back and saw Norris lying there, wounded. Two caterpillars stared at each other for a split second.

"—I'm sorry!"

I, Johnny, a Hawk Moth larva, brushed away my tears, turned back, and raced across the ground. I heard a distant war cry behind me. When I looked back just once, a cluster of withered leaves dancing in the wind looked just like yellow butterflies.

"Goodbye... Swallowtail..." I whispered and moved forward. I didn't look back a second time.

"...So the witness is a caterpillar?"

That was the first thing I yelled after hearing Naga's story. It seemed the gist of it was that the caterpillars had located the beetles' headquarters and told Naga the location... but looking closely, there was a single caterpillar on the branch Naga was holding. Was that Johnny? Was that him?

While I was feeling drained in various ways, the shoulders of Dire—who was standing with his back to us—were trembling slightly. He wiped his eyes with his arm.

"The feelings of those caterpillars... I won't let them go to waste! I'll definitely defeat the Beetle King and pass this story down so that no one forgets the brave Swallowtail larva was there! I'll tell it as the 'Saga of the Swallowtail'!"

Well... I wasn't going to stop him, but...

"But Naga, how did you understand what the caterpillar was saying?"

When I asked, she knit her brows. "...Huh? Lina, what on earth are you talking about? Words? There’s no way a caterpillar could talk."

"Wait just a minute!" I shouted. "If you can't even communicate, then what was that story just now? Was it body language?"

At my question, Naga let out a small laugh and turned a look on me as if I were the one being unreasonable.

"Caterpillars and body language? How could I do something so common-sense-defying? Don't be ridiculous."

I felt an indescribable sense of humiliation, like blood was about to spurt from my ears. "Then what?! Does that mean the story just now was total nonsense?"

"Calling it nonsense is rude," Naga said with a composed expression, brushing her hair back. "Could you perhaps call it a 'liberal translation'?"

"Gaaah! I’m asking you what the hell you translated! If we go there believing your story and find no boss, let alone a cave, I'm going to give you two a piece of my mind until you cry!"

I had a million things I wanted to say, but I had to check how reliable the information was. Anyway, I whispered to Naga, "But at a glance, it doesn't look like there are any flower beetles here..."

I looked at the cave and muttered. If this were a hideout, I'd expect countless beetles to be flying around the entrance. Naga, on the other hand, glanced at the cave and said airily:

"If I can tell, I can tell. It can't be helped."

"Don't just brush it off with 'it can't be helped'!" Dire and I shouted in unison. Then, from beside me, Dire spoke up.

"I believe it!" He stood firm, fists trembling. "Look at this guy's eyes! These aren't the eyes of a liar!"

No. Even if you talk about his eyes... They're compound eyes.

"I believe in this Johnny! I'm not going to tell you that you have to believe him too. But isn't it worth at least going to check it out!?"

As he spoke with such fire, Naga nodded repeatedly. I didn't think it would be strange if Naga and a caterpillar were communicating in a way humans couldn't understand.

After pushing through greenery where not even a beast-trail existed, we reached our destination.

"...It really was there. A cave..."

I stopped in my tracks and muttered in shock. A space had suddenly opened up, like a valley. The darkness yawning in the opposite slope was large enough for a carriage to enter. Dire looked at me with a triumphant gaze.

"See! Johnny's story was true after all! ...Wait, Naga, where's Johnny?"

"Hmph... it seems you don't understand the heart of a warrior! If I had brought Johnny this far, he would have tried to fight the beetles even if I told him not to. To keep him out of danger, I steeled my heart and tossed him aside somewhere back there!"

"Is that so!"

He actually accepted that. Well, I didn't really care what happened to Johnny the caterpillar. We all exchanged glances, and Dire nodded slightly.

"For now, let's go see how things look inside—"

"No, wait," I said, immediately stopping his straightforward idea. "Even if the beetles are in there, if we just barge in and they fly away, it'll all be for nothing."

Of course, the truth was I just didn't want to go into a cave that might be packed with beetles.

"Then what do we do? You aren't going to say we should wait for them to come out, are you?"

"Of course not. I'll smoke them out."

I began to chant a spell.

"Spirit Magic!"

I slammed my hand onto the ground! In response to the "words of power" I wove, the earth and stones throbbed and surged, creating a large humanoid shape!

"Oh!" Dire cried out in admiration. It was a Golem, a clay doll born of magic that follows its creator's orders.

"Golem!" I pointed sharply at the cave. "Go inside that cave! Once you reach the very back, go wild!"

The Golem began to move. If a thing like that started rampaging in the back of the cave, the beetles would naturally come flooding out. I turned to Naga.

"Naga! We're going to attack the beetles when they fly out! We'll use fire spells, so get ready!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

At the same time, Naga and I began chanting. Normally, I wouldn't want to use fire spells in a place like this for fear of starting a forest fire, but our enemies were countless beetles. It was already proven that cold-based spells left too many survivors. If it looked like a fire was starting, we'd just have to use cold spells to put it out later.

The Golem vanished into the darkness of the cave. Naga and I finished our chants and hid in the grass, waiting for the moment to come. Silence and tension clashed for a brief time. That silence was shattered by a sound like an explosion—the buzzing of countless wings!

A swarm of black specks burst out of the cave, shimmering in the sunlight.

"Fireball!"

"Flare Arrow!"

Naga and I unleashed our spells! The flames began to pierce and consume the black swarm. We took down a fair number, but more were bound to follow. I prepared my next spell without pause.

However—

GOOOOOOOOBAAAAAA!

Suddenly, a sound like a rumble from the depths of the earth echoed around us. It came from the back of the cave. Using that sound as a signal, the beetles that had been about to fly out regained their composure and retreated back into the cave.

Silence followed. We couldn't even hear the sound of the Golem rampaging anymore. The three of us looked at each other.

"...What... was that just now...?"

"There is only one answer," Dire said without hesitation. "It was the one Johnny mentioned... the Beetle King, Goba."

"No. Beetles don't cry out. They don't have voices."

As I waved my hands in denial, he looked off into the distance. "We know many legends. Among the great kings and heroes of legend, there are those who easily accomplish things humans could never do. The same applies to beetles! Even if a normal beetle doesn't cry out, it's not strange for a great King to do so!"

"It is strange!" As I snapped back at him, Naga laughed through her nose.
"Hmph. I suppose a commoner like you just can't understand."

"What does being a commoner have to do with...! Argh, enough! We don't have time for this! We're going in with the same pattern again!"

I unilaterally declared our next move and summoned another Golem. This time, I ordered it to enter the cave while striking the walls. It obeyed, but the moment it stepped into the hole—

Snap!

Something flew out from the darkness and easily smashed the Golem to pieces. As the three of us cried out in shock, a creature larger than a bull slowly emerged from the gloom.

"W-what on earth is that?!"

I was the only one who screamed. Naga and Dire turned puzzled eyes toward me.

"What do you mean 'what'..."

"It's obviously the Beetle King."

They spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"There's no such thing as a beetle that damn big!"

At my perfectly logical point, Naga and Dire looked at each other.

"It can't be helped. He's a King. See, Johnny said the King was huge. I actually thought he'd be even bigger."

"Perhaps he's using an aura to make himself look larger than he actually is," Naga added, brushing her hair back. "Regardless, it doesn't matter what you say, Lina. He's right there."

She was right. No matter how much I argued common sense, the giant beetle in front of the cave wasn't going to vanish.

"Fine! In that case, we just have to take him down!"

"Hmph! I know that!"

Naga responded to my words, and the two of us leapt out from the grass while chanting. Seeing this as the signal for battle, the Beetle King let out a roar that shook the air!

Suddenly, a distortion in the atmosphere appeared around the beetle and flew toward us! Sensing danger, Naga and I jumped to the left and right. The distortion tore through the empty air and slammed into the thicket of weeds and trees. With a sharp sound, the greenery was shredded and scattered!

That was the mysterious attack that had defeated Norris in Johnny's story.

"This... this beetle is no joke!" Dire shouted.

I'll say it again: there is no beetle that can attack like that. But it was a fact that the attack had come! That was likely what destroyed the Golem. The King reacted to Dire's voice.

GOOOOOOOOOBAAAAAAA!

The shockwave produced by the King's roar surged toward Dire!

"Watch out!"

If I moved to cover him, I could just barely make it in time! Though, I didn't actually feel like covering him!

"Dohyooooooon!"

Taking the hit at close range, he was blown away! I told him it was dangerous. Honestly, he's such a handful. Regardless, I would avenge him! I unleashed my finished spell at the Beetle King!

"Flare Arrow!"

I scattered the aim of the dozen fire arrows so they would hit whether he flew or ran! With that massive body, evasion was impossible! The Beetle King stood still, perhaps bracing himself. Then—the flames erupted!

At least two of my fire arrows scored direct hits! Crimson flames engulfed his lapis-and-gold body! But when the fire died down, the Beetle King remained completely unchanged.

"No way...!" I groaned in shock.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Not a single scorch mark was on his shell; not even a single antenna had been burned off. A moment later, Naga’s cold spell hit the massive body, sealing the beetle in a block of ice. But as soon as the King shook his body, the ice shattered into tiny pieces.

It didn't work! I'll say it again: there is no beetle like this!

"I see. So that's how it was," I realized. I finally understood. I had been right all along.

He was a giant, ox-like creature that neutralized fire and cold attack magic. No mere drone beetle could do that.

"Naga!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "This guy is probably a subspecies of Lesser Demon or something! If you're going to use Black Magic, stick to Astral-side or Dark-elemental spells!"

"—Hmph! So that’s it!" Naga replied, beginning to chant a new spell.

Exactly. Just as I had been pointing out from the start, this thing wasn't a drone beetle to begin with. The fact that simple fire and cold spells didn't work was a specialty of the monster race. Even if its shape and form were that of a giant beetle, it was likely either a type of Lesser Demon or a chimera created by some sorcerer.

The terrifying thought of a high-ranking pure Demon—even higher than a Brass Demon—crossed my mind for a split second, but a pure Demon with intelligence equal to or greater than a human wouldn't bother creating a "Drone Beetle Kingdom." ...No, it was probably more natural to assume that rather than becoming their king, he was controlling the beetles through some method.

In any case, once I knew that, I just had to use a spell that worked! I began to chant my own spell.

The Beetle King roared again! Just as I thought he was launching another one-pattern shockwave attack, this time the expected ripples in the air didn't appear. I didn't know what he was up to, but regardless, I just had to take him down!

First, Naga unleashed a strike!

"Elmekia Lance!"

It was a spell that dealt direct damage to the opponent's spirit! If it hit, neither a Lesser Demon nor a chimera would get off easy!

Perhaps sensing that the spell would be a fatal blow, the Beetle King leaped upward, spreading his wings to escape into the empty air!

That was the moment I had been waiting for! Aiming for the split second when his wings weren't fully extended and his movement became linear, I fired right into his path—

"Elmekia Lance!"

But at that moment, a black mist billowed out from the cave and enveloped the Beetle King! My strike was blocked by the mist and failed to reach him!

He had used a swarm of beetles as his own shield!

In that case, I just had to use a spell that could blast through the swarm and take him down! I immediately began to chant the next spell—

The King roared fiercely again! That roar must have been an order. From the emerging swarm, one mass headed toward Naga, and another came straight for me!

This was bad! If the tiny beetles swarmed us in such numbers, they wouldn't cause serious injury, but they would block our vision, fly into our mouths, and crawl into our clothes, hindering our movements! Furthermore, it was impossible to kill them all or dodge every single one!

I jumped back to gain some distance and time while hurrying to finish my spell, but would I make it in time? In the corner of my eye, I saw Naga being buried under a mountain of beetles!

Right before my eyes, Dire collapsed with a thud, and the beetles, losing the King's control, scattered in all directions. A loud thump echoed—it was the sound of the Beetle King falling to the ground!

He wasn't dead yet! He seemed to have taken a heavy blow, but he was still alive enough to wiggle his legs. For a Demon, who is essentially a spiritual being, it must have been a significant wound, even if a human or a beetle might have only been knocked unconscious.

My vision was blocked. But it wasn't because I was swarmed by beetles!

"Finish the spell now!"

Dire's voice echoed through the buzzing of countless wings! He had jumped in between me and the beetles at the very last second to act as my shield. It was the same Dire' who had been blown away by the King's shockwave earlier!

Though his appearance was the same, I clearly saw his eyes burning with the color of rage as he picked himself up.

A single person stepping in only bought a tiny bit of time. But within those few seconds, my spell was complete.

*Thanks, D*ire*! Your sacrifice won't be in vain!*

"Fuerza!"

The shockwave of blue light I released pierced through Dire, through the beetles, and struck the Beetle King in mid-air!

A roar like a beast's scream echoed! It was a spell that dealt damage to both the physical body and the spirit.

The King kicked the ground with his six legs and started to run toward me—but then, a swirling band of light flew in and impaled the King’s side!

The King let out a final death rattle! The one who fired the shot was, needless to say, Naga the White Serpent! She was still covered in beetles from head to toe, which was exactly why she wasn't about to forgive the Beetle King. Forgetting about her was the King's fatal mistake.

The King struggled a few times, but soon stopped moving and crumbled into dust. Judging by this way of perishing—leaving no corpse behind—he really had been a type of Lesser Demon.

The beetles, who had likely been controlled, lost their direction and scattered away in the blink of an eye. The legend of the Beetle King came to an end here.

Peace returned to the forest and the village. According to Naga, the green caterpillars were now enjoying their freedom, liberated from the beetle tyranny.

The beetles, having lost their master, returned to being ordinary insects, sucking tree sap and being chased by hornets, reclaiming their original way of life.

Meanwhile, Naga and I were treated to a feast of the highest quality Panon, even if some were slightly bruised. Man, that taste... if someone ate that stuff all the time, they would definitely be ruined as a human. That's how good it was.

Both Naga and I received a bit of reward money, and finally, the day came to leave the village.

"I’m truly grateful," Dire said with a smile as the villagers saw us off. He didn't seem to mind that I had blasted him with my spell. Maybe he mistakenly thought it was the beetles' doing, or maybe the shock had wiped his memory.

"If you hadn't been here, the Panon would have been destroyed by the beetles. If that happened, the village would have faced a crisis of survival. We will never forget the debt we owe you for saving us. We'll pass down your names in this village forever as the Beetle Slayers."

I winced. "Beetle Slayers" was a bit much.

"You're so humble, saying you don't want to make a name for yourselves," he added.

No, it wasn't humility. It was just that "Beetle Slayer" sounded terrible.

"Goodbye then. Take care. Stop by again if you have the chance."

I raised a hand in farewell and started walking. Naga and I exchanged a look. Our eyes told the story: if they actually started passing down such a ridiculous legend, we would definitely come back here and go on a rampage.

With that shared thought hidden in our hearts, Naga and I left the village of Tune behind.

The Silver Bullet

Snow dyed the world, melting into the color of my breath. A thin mist hung over the area, and the distant scenery dissolved into white. The trees and the town were all topped with white crowns, and the surface of the nearby lake was frozen solid.

Looking across the lake, I could see the faint shadow of buildings. I wondered if the town was split by the lake, or if that was a different town altogether. The snow had stopped falling, but the wind was just plain freezing.

Walking quickly down the street, an inn sign caught my eye. I brushed the snowflakes off my cloak and stepped through the entrance.

"Welcome!" I stopped at the greeting. The first floor was a restaurant and bar, and the second floor held the guest rooms—a common layout for an inn. However, there were more customers inside than I expected. Or rather, the place was packed.

The area that should have been the dining room had tables and chairs pushed into a corner, and dozens of people were standing in the open space. I stood there wondering what was going on.

"Oh, a guest? I seem to have startled you," a middle-aged man with a salt-and-pepper beard said with a gentle smile. "We're discussing the festival for this town tomorrow. So—are you staying the night? Or just for a meal?"

Judging by the question, he was likely the innkeeper.

"A room, for now. But a festival... it feels a bit early for a New Year's festival."

"Yes. We have something called the Snowball Festival, unique to this area."

"Snowball Festival?" I repeated.

"Yes. Festivals for spring, summer, and autumn to pray for or celebrate harvests are everywhere, but people wonder what on earth there is to celebrate with snowballs in the middle of this freezing winter. Long ago, this town of Riet and the town of Mio across the lake were at odds. But one day, the daughter and son of the respective

mayors fell in love. They hid letters inside snowballs to communicate, which eventually led to the two villages making up. In honor of that story, whenever the lake freezes enough to cross, people from both towns throw snowballs at each other to pledge eternal friendship."

The story itself was a bit cliché. "...But throwing snowballs at each other for friendship... I feel like that would just start a fight."

At my remark, the man smiled and waved his hands. "No, no. The rule is that whatever happens on the festival day stays on the festival day. Since the towns are close, there are often disagreements about fishing boundaries and such, but by venting those frustrations cheerfully and openly once a year through the festival, we maintain harmony. And of course, putting stones inside the snowballs is forbidden. Putting paper with messages inside is allowed, though. It’s strictly meant to be fun and lighthearted."

"I see." If I thought of it like me firing a Dragon Slave at a random mountain to relieve stress, I guess it made sense. Since it was a unique festival, I thought it might not be a bad idea to watch.

"How about it? If you don't dislike snowball fights, why don't you join in?"

"Eh? Is it okay? Even for an outsider like me?"

"Of course! If our guests have a good time, it helps the village's reputation. Right, everyone?" He turned to the crowd, and they all responded with friendly smiles and cheers of agreement.

A snowball fight... I used to do that a lot back home. Memories came rushing back with a sense of nostalgia. In Zephilia, where I grew up, the snow piled up quite a bit in the winter.

"Well then, I'll take you up on that. I'd love to join in."

"The pleasure is ours. I'm Clive Sanders. I'm the owner of this inn and the town mayor."

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse." We exchanged friendly smiles and nodded. And so, it was decided that I would participate in the unusual Snowball Festival.

Any girl my age would usually wake up if she felt hostility or bloodlust while sleeping. That morning was no different. I sensed a cold hostility and leaped out of bed.

Faint morning light leaked through the gaps in the window shutters. Based on the brightness, it was around dawn. My room was on the second floor, and the intense hostility was coming from below the inn.

Of course, back home, there were many types of snow play, and snowball fights went without saying. I remembered my childhood days, running through a white world, building trenches and ramparts, setting traps, feeding the enemy false information to lure them into narrow paths, and then raining down one-sided attacks while wearing innocent smiles.

Sorry, guys. Even I have to admit that was a bit mean.

It was cold outside, but I thought it wouldn't be bad to return to my childhood roots and enjoy playing in the snow for a while.

The hostility wasn't directed at me, but I couldn't exactly sleep peacefully in such an atmosphere without knowing what was going on. I got dressed, killed my footsteps, and headed downstairs to investigate.

I crept halfway down the stairs and peeked from the shadows. I heard the low voices of men coming from the dining room.

And there they were—countless snowmen! The extraordinary hostility was emanating from this army of snowmen!

"What...?" I groaned quietly as I walked down, and one of the snowmen turned toward me.

Of course, they weren't real snowmen. They were the townspeople, wrapped from head to toe in thick, white winter gear with only their faces peeking out. There were about as many as there had been yesterday.

"Good morning, Miss Lina," Clive, the mayor and innkeeper, said with a smile as he turned around.

The mayor’s smile was bright, but beneath it, a thick, demonic aura continued to billow out.

".....You're..... really fired up, aren't you.....?" I muttered.

"Just imagining them writhing in agony after being showered by our simultaneous snow-volley! It's so delightful, so wonderful, a cheerful smile just naturally floats to my face!"

"Yeah! Of course!" the mayor replied.

...Cheerful? Was... that what he called it...?

Clive wore the smile of a demon. "Over the past few decades, I haven't forgotten a single face of those who hit me with a snowball! Just thinking about it makes me imagine dyeing the snow-white town of Mio bright red with the bloody vomit of those bastards! It makes my blood boil and my flesh dance!"

Specifically, he seemed to have a grudge against the rival mayor, Thor Bennett.

" Sir, didst thou just say 'bloody vomit'!? Um? Wait, didn't you say this was a festival to deepen friendships and leave no grudges behind?"

I found myself reflexively using polite honorifics. The mayor turned a plastered-on smile toward me.

"Heh heh heh... quite. Exactly so. Usually, I've retaliated against those bastards with a hundred snowballs, but there are still many I cannot forgive! Ten years ago! They pelted my son, Kyle, with snowballs until he cried! Just because I organized a retaliation unit to pelt Thor's son until he cried, they've been stubbornly targeting me and Kyle ever since!"

".....Both of you are such immature old men."

The person who spoke from behind the mayor was a young man with a sharp gaze.

"To deepen tomorrow's friendship, we leave no grudges on other days. In other words!"

If he called the mayor "Old Man," he must be the son mentioned in the story. The boy who was crying ten years ago had now grown into—

"Today's friendship is tossed into the gutter, and the grudges from the festival day can be carried over to the next festival!"

"That's your interpretation!?" I shouted.

"This year, for sure—"

"I mean, wasn't the talk supposed to be about having fun and being cheerful!?" I interrupted.

"Yeah! I'll be the one to finish them off," Kyle continued, ignoring me. "Since that day ten years ago, I've lived my life vowing only to have my revenge."

Now, he had grown into a desolate-eyed avenger! This guy completely took a wrong turn in life because of a snowball fight! He was holding onto grudges every single day! What kind of festival was this!? The man and woman from the legend the festival was based on were surely crying right now!

"Today's strategy is as follows," the Mayor said, turning a gaze of steel toward me. "At the right moment, a detached force will detour across the frozen lake and launch a surprise attack on the town of Mio.

We'll make a blood sacrifice of the women and children cowering inside their houses and make them scream as much as possible to shake the men on the front lines! While the enemy is in chaos, our main force will advance and, together with the detached force, pinch and annihilate them!

Well, since you aren't used to this, Miss Lina, you can stay in the rear and leisurely throw snowballs at the prisoners we've tied up while they scream and cry. Please enjoy yourself."

"How can I enjoy that!?"

What was with this bloodthirsty snowball fight!? Where was the part about returning to a state of childhood innocence!?

"---Oh, that's right. Also," the mayor took a blue headband from a nearby table and handed it to me. "During the festival, please wrap this somewhere visible. Many people participate wearing white clothes to blend in with the snow. We use these to distinguish friend from foe.

We are blue, and the folks from Mio are red. Anyone moving without an identification headband will be considered an enemy by both sides and will be attacked, so please be careful."

.....The more I heard, the more I wanted to withdraw. But I had a feeling that if I said that now, they'd say something like "Death to traitors." Well, for now, I

figured I’d just try it out, and if I got bored or couldn't stand it anymore, I’d just make up an excuse and quit.

Thinking that, I took the blue headband.

Clang, clang, clang... The sound of church bells echoed through the silver world. That was the signal for the start of the festival's snowball fight.

Facing each other across the frozen lake were the people of the two towns. That said, the sky was overcast and freezing cold, and just like yesterday, a thin mist hung in the air, blurring the distant scenery. Looking toward the opposite shore, I could vaguely make out the shapes of trees and houses, but no human figures were visible.

It wasn't that no one was there; likely, the people over there were also wearing white clothes to blend into the snow. Even my allies with the blue headbands were dressed entirely in white.

Among those gathered by the lake, I was the only one not in white. My style consisted of a thick coat over my usual outfit.

"The Snowball Festival is now open!"

Mayor Clive shouted at the top of his lungs. In response, a distant man's voice rose from the other side of the lake.

"Rule one! Only snowballs may be thrown in the festival! No other weapons are permitted!"

"Rule one! It is forbidden to put foreign objects like stones into the snowballs! However, in keeping with tradition, messages to the opposing town may be enclosed!"

That was Mayor Clive again. The two were alternating.

"Terrifying! That's incredibly terrifying!" I thought.

I felt like some very dangerous conditions were mixed in there... but maybe that was part of the fun. I crouched down, scooped up some snow, and began firmly packing it with both hands, making a gyumu, gyumu sound as I slowly approached the lake. The cold and the creaking of the snow through my gloves felt nice.

Well, it looked like it would take a little longer for the people running from the opposite shore to reach us.

"One! Even if you are knocked unconscious, you can rejoin the festival once you wake up!"

"One! Those whose heads are destroyed are disqualified!"

...Wait, "destroyed"?

"Now then!"

"Snowball Festival!"

The two voices harmonized, and with a roar, the crowd began to charge. Basically, it seemed the point was just to enjoy the snowball fight however one liked. In that case, I decided to just relax and have fun.

I was positioned near the left edge of the line stretching along the lake. There were sparse trees there, making it perfect for cover. There was no need to rush in right now. For starters, I'd just intercept those coming to attack, partly as a warm-up.

I could have used the snowballs the townspeople had prepared, but I preferred making my own. I had left my shoulder guards and short sword back at the inn. I had taken off my usual bandana and now wore the blue headband. The number of people gathered by the lake reached several hundred from our town alone.

Thump! A snowball hit a tree trunk slightly behind me and shattered easily. Something peeked out from the crumbled center.

...Was that the message card I'd heard about? I was curious, but for now, I had to focus on the enemies in front of me.

Turning my attention back, the immediate skirmish had already been settled. My allies had only been rattled by the ambush for a moment. They quickly regained their footing and began raining a torrent of snowballs down on the infiltration unit. The enemy wasn't numerous. Once it came to this, they were simply overwhelmed by numbers.

I walked over to the tree where the snowball had hit and dug out the palm-sized message card.

On it, drawn in bright red ink, was a wide-open eyeball and the word "DEATH" written countless times.

"This isn't a message of friendship, it's just a straight-up curse!" I yelled.

While I was being thoroughly creeped out, the "suicide squad" that had been pinned down by concentrated fire was being dragged away nearby. On top of them, large, snowman-sized snowballs were being dropped one after another—

"Gwahhh! The snow! The snow! Motherrrrr!"

With the sound of falling snow, the enemy's screams were abruptly cut off.

What kind of hellscape was this? I mean, was there ever a festival so full of grudges and bitterness!? I wanted nothing to do with such a dismal snowball fight! If I could, I wanted to leave right now... but my luggage was still in my room at the inn. If I didn't have a good excuse to pull out, the mayor—or rather, the innkeeper—wouldn't be convinced.

...It couldn't be helped. My last resort: I would purposely get hit by an enemy attack and say, "Wow, this is a bit too hardcore for an outsider. I'll just watch from the sidelines now," and then withdraw!

"Enemy vanguard is coming!"

At someone's shout, I looked up to see about a dozen people who had first left the opposite town reaching our shore. Based on our positions, I'd only be in range of two or three of them. However, since most of the townspeople were in white, I—in my different colors—would definitely stand out if I charged in!

Just as I thought, one of the red-headbands threw a snowball at me!

"Too slow!"

I twisted my body as I threw the snowball in my right hand, easily dodging the incoming shot. It was a minimal, efficient movement of throwing and evading in one sequence. The opponent managed to dodge my attack and threw another!

But at this point, the opponent's stance was broken. I twisted again, using my flowing cloak to catch and brush away the ball, while simultaneously scooping up snow with my right hand and firing!

Of course, a lump that could barely be called a snowball wouldn't do any damage, but when a shot fired from a low angle hit him in the jaw and scattered, it stole his vision for an instant! In that moment, the countless snowballs thrown by my nearby allies pelted him!

"Gah!?"

Ignoring the man as he fell with a death rattle, I closed the distance to the next opponent! I toyed with the enemies, and my allies finished them off one by one. Wait, that wasn't right! By the time I snapped out of it and critiqued myself, it was too late. The enemy’s first wave had been completely silenced.

...Damn it. I intended to get hit and retreat, but whenever I'm attacked, my brain and body just reflexively go into combat mode. Thanks to that—

"You're pretty good! Haven't seen your face before!"

"She's a traveler staying at the mayor's place, looks like she joined in!"

"I think her name was Lina."

The townspeople were full of praise.

Tch. I blew it. The second wave would be here soon, and now it would be awkward to suddenly get hit and back out...

Mayor Clive, who had approached at some point, nodded with satisfaction. "You're amazing, Miss Lina. At this rate, we might have an overwhelming victory this year. Second unit! Advance!"

At his signal, the next ten or so people stepped onto the lake—but then!

"What!?" "Gwah!" "Gah!"

"---Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Several screams and an unmistakable, idiotic laugh echoed from the other side of the lake.

"---That's!"

"Do you know her, Miss Lina?" Mayor Clive asked.

Sweat rolled down my cheek as I gave a small nod. "The incarnation of chaos, the embodiment of madness. The one who consumes and swallows everything. The one who forgets the purpose for the sake of the means. The one who disappoints the world."

On the misty ice, a shadow faintly emerged in the distance.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

As the shadow became clearer, the laughter grew louder.

"Don't look, don't touch, don't speak. My self-proclaimed rival, the automatic chain letter of misfortune... Her name is Naga the White Serpent!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Finally, as her form came into view, the people of the town let out groans of shock and pure disgust. I, too, let out a cry of surprise.

"What...?"

Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace! Ridiculously revealing clothes! Well, up to there, she was the same as always. But what was different was the red headband on her head and the five or six chunks of snow—too large to be called snowballs—orbiting her in the air!

"What... is that...!?" Someone from the town muttered, unable to hide their agitation.

This was bad. If she pressed the advantage here, we'd fall apart.

"Stay calm! She's just using some kind of magic to control the snowballs!" I shouted.

Naga’s idiotic laughter stopped abruptly.

"...That voice... Lina Inverse! What a coincidence."

Her gaze locked onto me. She must have seen it—my blue headband.

"I didn't think you'd be participating in this festival too. And furthermore! It seems you're on the Blue Team! It truly is our destiny to fight! However! In a contest where only snowballs are weapons, I wonder how much of a chance you—who specializes in fire spells—actually have! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

After spouting that triumphant nonsense, she changed her course toward me!

Dammit! In such a weird situation, against such a weird opponent!

"Eei! Don't flinch!"

At Mayor Clive’s command, my allies snapped out of it and threw their stockpiled snowballs at Naga all at once!

But before they could hit her, the large chunks of snow orbiting her moved on their own to act as shields, catching every single snowball! They didn't just knock them away; as she said, they "caught" them, and the snowballs became part of the masses protecting Naga.

Watching that, my allies stopped their attack.

"Laughable, Blue Team! Did you think my original spell, the 'White Magic Phantasmagoria,' which I developed because I was so bored, would be defeated by mere snowball attacks?"

Dammit, Naga! You developed a spell like that for such a reason!? Well, it certainly was like her. But even that spell had a weakness. While its defense against snowballs was nearly perfect—

Suddenly, the snow masses spat out the countless snowballs they had just caught! Fired at high speed, the white projectiles pelted my allies! Multiple screams overlapped. Fortunately, I jumped instantly and used Mayor Clive as a shield to escape harm—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Do you understand now, Lina!? The terror of this spell! It seems you dodged the first one, but I wonder how long you can keep running?"

"...Li... Miss Lina...!"

Staggering from the pain of the snowball hits, the mayor turned a pleading look toward me. Dealing with a creature like this was surely a first for them. I understood his desire to be saved, but—

This was the first time I was seeing this spell, too. I needed to come up with a plan.

"Stop the attack! Pull back and we'll reform our strategy!"

I thought they might resist, but—

"I... I understand! Everyone! You heard her! Fall back to the back of the town!"

The mayor, who had been stunned by either Naga’s appearance or her spell, shouted the order. Most of our allies turned tail and ran. The mayor and I also began to retreat—but then.

"What are you doing, you lot!?" the mayor barked at a group of ten men who stood their ground against Naga.

"We'll hold her off here!" they replied.

One of the men answered with his back to me. His voice was heavy, devoid of any jokes or even a single complaint. Everyone just looked down in silence, trying to steady their breathing. They knew. They knew they could never defeat Naga on their own. And honestly, I couldn't blame them. After being shown something so far beyond common sense, they had been forced to realize the overwhelming difference in power.

Yet, even so, they had resolved to stay behind and act as a foundation—to let us escape and ensure tomorrow's victory for the Blue Team.

"I... I'm reporting!" one of our comrades cried out, running toward us through the heavy silence.

Taking their spirit to heart, the Town Mayor squeezed out his words with gut-wrenching grief.

"---I'm sorry!!"

He began to run alongside me. We didn't look back. Naga’s idiotic laughter continued to echo through the lakeside town, on and on, forever.

We finally caught our breath within the forest surrounding the town. I had given orders to set up obstacles along the way to slow Naga down, and we decided to rest in this cluttered area. However, the drop in my allies' morale was painful to witness.

"Just as Miss Lina instructed, we left out the large pot of stew that was prepared for our lunch," a scout reported. "The target began eating immediately. Her progress has been halted for now!"

A collective sigh of wonder rose from the men. "Oh!"

"However—" the scout continued, and everyone fell silent at his tone. "At the rate she's eating, she'll finish the entire thing before noon!"

The allies began to stir nervously. That pot was meant to feed the entire town; its volume was massive. To anyone who didn't know Naga, the idea of one person finishing it by noon was unbelievable.

"There is one more problem!" The bad news kept coming. "Using the route the target secured, the people from Mio Town are crossing over in small groups! At this rate, the longer time passes, the more disadvantaged we become!"

"Damn it! Those Mio people...!"

"If only we didn't have that weird helper...!"

The allies began to curse under their breath. Mayor Clive's face was thick with the color of agony.

"Miss Lina, is there no other way?" he asked.

I chose my words carefully. "I certainly can use many spells... for example, if I used fire-based attack spells, it would be easy to break Naga's technique."

"---No, Miss Lina, that's---"

"I know," I said, cutting off the Mayor's protest. "It's a forbidden move."

The absolute condition of this Snowball Festival was that the only weapons allowed were snowballs. No matter how much I stretched the rules, fire spells were a clear violation. Naga, on the other hand, was using magic but only to manipulate and weaponize the snowballs themselves.

If I were to lose to a monster like Naga, I could just write it off as bad luck, like being bitten by a dog. But letting the Red Team have their way was infuriating.

It would be easy to ignore the rules and char Naga to a crisp, but if I did that, she would spend the rest of her life saying, "Hmph, in the end, you could only beat me by breaking the rules!" I absolutely hated that idea. Of course, if I just walked away, she'd say I ran with my tail between my legs. That was even worse.

Therefore, even if I had to stretch the interpretation of the rules a bit, I had to fight and win within them.

"I won't say I can definitely do it... but I'll try."

At my words, everyone around me turned their hopeful gazes toward me. I stood up and nodded with determination, and the men stood up with me, cheering.

"I'll draw Naga's attention! Meanwhile, you all circle around and crush the Red Team who came over here thinking they've already won! I'll leave the commands for that to the Mayor!"

I gave a single nod, turned on my heel, and started walking back toward the battlefield.

The large commercial stew pot was a conspicuous stain in the white, snow-covered world. It was already less than half full. Naga scooped stew from the pot into a wooden bowl, brought the spoon to her mouth, and repeated the motion with lightning speed. Every movement was as graceful as a dancing butterfly, yet as fast as a flash of lightning.

Standing tall in the snow, consuming stew at an outrageous pace, was none other than Naga the White Serpent!

She sensed my presence and stopped moving. Slowly, she looked up.

"Ho ho ho ho! If you don't think you've lost, then perhaps you'd like to try and defeat me in a snowball fight?"

"That's exactly what I want!"

It was a festival I had joined on a whim, but now there was no backing down. Naga and I faced off with the stew pot between us. At that moment, our allies burst from the shadows of the trees and houses, shouting a war cry as they attacked the "Red Headbands" who had landed on this side of the lake.

"Hmph... I thought for sure you had run away with your tail between your legs... but it seems you've come out prepared to face me! Now, Lina Inverse!"

The curtain was raised on our final battle!

Naga stepped back slightly, waved her left hand, and several chunks of snow appeared from behind her, beginning to dance around her. It seemed she hadn't released her spell; she had simply kept the snow blocks on standby while she ate.

"Your technique is strong in a snowball fight, I'll give you that... but you don't seriously think you can beat me with just that, do you?"

I began chanting my spell, muffled by the roars of my allies. Naga didn't miss my movement, but she just watched with a relaxed, smug look on her face. Man, that confidence of hers was annoying!

Naga's technique—manipulating snow blocks to act as shields, catching incoming snowballs, and launching them back—was nearly invincible in this game. But I was going to crush it.

Finally, the spell was finished. I crouched down and pressed my hands against the ground where the earth peeked through the snow.

"Vu-Vraimer!"

I released the words. The earth responded, shaking. The accumulated snow split apart as stones and soil twisted and gathered together. An incarnation of the earth rose up—a giant stone doll in the shape of a human, more than twice my height.

A Golem!

Seeing this, Naga let out her signature boisterous laugh and pointed a finger at me.

"You make me laugh, Lina Inverse! Attacking with a golem is a total violation of the rules! However...!"

She said exactly what I expected. It was true that in this festival, having a golem attack directly would be a complete foul. But...

"Golem!" I pointed at Naga and gave the order. "Make snowballs and throw them at that thing!"

Naga's face went pale. The golem groaned as its earthen body creaked. With its massive palms, it scraped up a huge amount of snow and compressed it.

"Trying to make a golem execute such a vague order... you'll see what happens! It's obvious if you think about it!" Naga shouted, her voice full of triumph.

But my goal wasn't a direct attack. I wanted the golem to create massive, hard snowballs and use its overwhelming power to shatter Naga's shield of snow blocks by sheer force. This way, I was still only using snowballs for the attack, so it didn't violate the regulations!

"Kh...!"

Naga panicked and tried to duck behind a building. The golem finished its snowball and—

Splat.

I was the one who let out a stunned cry. The snow the golem had tried to compress had simply crumbled and flown apart between its massive palms.

"Ho ho ho ho! You make me laugh, Lina Inverse!"

I wanted to snap back that she was the one who just tried to run away in fear, but I couldn't deny that I had messed up. If I said something now, she'd just hit me with a "howl of a loser" remark.

Fine! I'll just insult her all I want after I win!

If the snow was crushing, I just had to ignore the hardness.

"Golem! Additional order! When making snowballs, stop applying pressure the moment they are firm enough not to fall apart!"

How about that!

The golem made another large snowball. This time, it seemed to have adjusted its strength. It held the ball in one hand, pulled back, and threw it at Naga as she tried to flee.

Poof.

I groaned again. The lightly packed snowball simply disintegrated in mid-air the moment the golem's brute strength launched it. The crumbled snow scattered in the wind, not even reaching Naga.

"Ho ho ho ho! Just how foolish are you, Lina Inverse? If you make a golem throw uncompressed snow with that much power, of course it's going to fall apart!"

Naga poked her head out from behind the house, looking incredibly smug. So annoying... but screaming wouldn't get me the win. I had to admit my plan was half-baked.

I couldn't retreat to rethink. Nearby, the battle between my Blue Team and the invading Red Team had already begun. We had the numbers, but the Blue Team was jittery because of Naga's presence. If I retreated now, it would look like a defeat. The Blue Team would lose heart, and the Red Team would get even bolder.

I waved my hands around in a fake fluster. "Oh no! It didn't work! What am I gonna do?"

Naga's laughter stopped. She glared at me with suspicious eyes. "That's suspicious... Lina, you're plotting something, aren't you?"

"Eh? Not really."

I just needed to make her paranoid to buy time. But that wouldn't last forever. I needed a real plan.

Just then, the wind shifted. In the changing breeze, I heard it—faint screams. Not the sound of the fight nearby, but coming from further away. From the direction of...

"Mio Town!" Naga turned and shouted.

The wind blew from across the lake, coming from the direction of the town of Mio. That meant something was happening over there. I suddenly remembered what the allied mayor had mentioned this morning: a plan to send a detached force around the flank to strike Mio directly and cause chaos. I had assumed the plan was scrapped

because Naga’s appearance threw our side into such a mess, but perhaps it had been carried out without my knowledge after all.
"Ah. Looks like something's happening," I said.

The Red Team began to be pushed back all at once. Amidst the white snowballs flying left and right, the volume of fire from the Reds was visibly thinning.

"Well then, shall we continue our battle?"

As I braced myself, Naga leaped back a great distance to open up some space. She pointed at me with a sharp gaze and shouted, "Fuh! Don't underestimate me, Lina Inverse! Now that I know this is a diversion, do you really think I'll fall for such obvious provocation? I'll go finish things over there and be back shortly, so wash your neck and wait for me!"

With that, Naga spun on her heel and dashed toward the lake. "Everyone! Mio is being attacked!" she bellowed to the rest of the Red Team.

Thank you, Naga. Really, thank you—for informing all those Red Team members who hadn't even noticed the trouble in Mio. In any case, this was convenient for me. I spoke with an air of "I knew this would happen all along."

"Heh... I've read your move, Lina! The golem was a feint to make us lower our guard so you could attack Mio directly. That was your aim!"

Those words changed the tide. Agitation rippled through the Red Team. Should they stay and fight, or return to protect the town? That hesitation dulled their movements.

I threw out a remark with smug confidence. "Well, what's certain is that while you were playing around with stew pots and me, that town over there became an interesting target."

Of course, it was a complete lie, but this was the time to push the bluff. "Now... I wonder about that?"

In contrast to the Reds, the Blue Team regained their momentum at the good news. In this state, the difference in numbers began to tell. Triggered by someone shouting, the Red Team started retreating one after another. Seeing this, the Blue Team grew even bolder.

But I couldn't afford to be careless. Even if our detached force had temporarily caused chaos in Mio, the enemy would likely regain control once they calmed down, given

their superior numbers. If that happened, Naga and the Red Team would settle down, and we'd be pushed back again. I had to push now, no matter what! I'd worry about Naga countermeasures later.

Running toward the lake, I considered which of my available spells I could use. "Now's our chance! Everyone, charge!"

"OOOOOOOOH!" My allies let out a war cry and immediately moved to pursue the Reds.

But—how was I supposed to defeat Naga? I had spells that could blow away a whole town, but under the "snowball weapon" rule, such techniques were useless. I could use several cold-element spells, but I didn't have anything that could specifically manipulate snow. If I understood the structure of a spell perfectly, I could arrange it on the spot to tweak the effects, but controlling snowballs wasn't something I could manage with a few minor adjustments. The target was restricted to "snow," not "cold air" or "ice." There usually weren't any mages who researched such things.

Of course, Naga wasn't "usual," but why on earth did she develop such a pinpoint spell? Maybe she led a life where losing a snowball fight was unacceptable... wait. A thought suddenly occurred to me. The reason Naga developed that spell—aside from her having too much free time—might be because she was, well, Naga.

If my hunch was right, there was a way to break that spell—or rather, a way to break Naga. I ran toward a snowball the size used for a snowman's body lying nearby. The Blue Team had been using it to finish off "prisoners." It was quite hard for its size and, of course, had significant weight. It wasn't something one could carry lightly.

Chanting a spell, I scooped up loose snow and pressed it onto the large snowball without packing it down.

"Raywing!"

Upon completing the spell, I hoisted the massive snowball above my head with both hands and released the "words of power." I had cast a spell that shrouded me in a wind barrier to allow high-speed flight. It was a tricky thing to control, where speed, altitude, and weight were proportional to the caster's magical power. The edges of the snowball poked out of the barrier, and I aimed that end forward as I soared over the frozen lake.

Transforming myself into a flying snowball, I charged at the Red Team advancing over the ice, maintaining an altitude about level with a person's stomach. I slammed into several people, sending them flying. I probably heard screams, but they were blocked by the wind barrier. I had expected a greater impact on my hands supporting the snowball, but it wasn't so bad. Likely, the wind flow was helping support the weight.

"Ho ho ho ho! It seems you've tried to be a bit clever, Lina Inverse! But—!"

Naga pointed at me with perfect timing. She had noticed my charge and the Red Team members were scrambling to get out of the way. Some people threw snowballs at me, but they were all deflected by the wind barrier. Soon, I saw a black shadow running across the ice. I caught up!

Feeling my presence, Naga looked back, her black cloak and hair streaming in the wind. Several chunks of snow dancing around her increased their rotation speed, shifting into an intercept stance. Being able to accurately predict what Naga would say was probably a sign that I was failing as a human being.

"If you think such petty tricks can break my spell, you are greatly mistaken!"

The snow chunks guarding Naga spun even faster. I circled her like a beast stalking its prey, waiting for an opening. Naga puffed out her chest—I couldn't hear her over the wind, so I filled in the dialogue in my head.

In the corner of my eye, I saw the Blue Team catching up and the Red Team stopping to engage them. Whether I fell here or Naga fell would shift the balance of morale for the entire battle. In other words, it wasn't an exaggeration to say our fight would determine the flow of the whole war!

Naga tracked my movements with her eyes. Several of her snow chunks were braced to receive my snowball. This was the moment. I made my move.

The instant Naga’s neck turned and she lost sight of me for a split second, I broke from my circular orbit and lunged toward her back.

"Hmph! You think you can take me by surprise with that?"

Probably saying something like that, Naga spun around and manipulated her snowballs. At that moment, I mustered all my strength and pulled into a steep climb. Reaching the limit of the spell's altitude, I dove straight down toward her! A charge fueled by the speed of the fall! Could Naga's snowball defense withstand this?

Naga manipulated all her snowballs, hoisting them above her head as a shield to take my hit. She was likely certain of her victory. But!

I canceled the spell. Using the snowball as a pivot, I leaped off just before impact. I grabbed the loose, unpacked snow I had stuck to my snowball and spread my arms like wings, hurling the snow at Naga from both sides of her shield.

"Wha—?"

The wind barrier was gone, and I could hear Naga's voice. Then: ***Poff!*** The sound of my loose snow hitting Naga directly. It wasn't packed, so it didn't hurt at all, but—

I landed on my feet and jumped back to create distance. After a brief silence—

"WA-HYAAAAAAAAAAAA!?" Naga let out a massive scream.

The tide of battle was decided. The battlefield froze for an instant at that scream. The gazes of both the Blue and Red headbands converged on the two of us: me standing there, and Naga writhing while letting out nonsensical shrieks. Her concentration must have broken, because her snowballs lost their power and fell to the ground.

"No way... she beat that opponent..." a Blue headband whispered in joy.

"Impossible... that lady was defeated..." a Red headband whispered in despair.

I spoke calmly, walking slowly toward her. "When I thought about why you created such a spell, I saw your weakness." I leaned down and scooped up some snow. Naga turned a terrified gaze toward me.

"Wait... Lina, you...!"

"That weakness is... THIS!"

I shouted and threw the snow over Naga's head. The loose snow scattered in the air, falling like countless grains.

"NEHYOOOOOOOO!?" Naga screamed again.

"Your outfit! If you think about it calmly, it's incredibly cold!"

Shoulder guards with spikes and a skull necklace—and a reckless amount of skin exposed. I pointed at the struggling Naga and yelled, "I'm so used to you looking like

that I almost forgot! It's your usual outfit, but it does nothing to block the cold! Moreover! If that snow sticks to your bare skin and melts! Just imagining it makes me shiver!"

Yes! The reason Naga developed this spell, the reason she stayed at the front from the start, and even the way she was wolfing down stew—it was all to ward off the cold! Once I realized that, I intentionally hit her with loose snow so it would scatter over her exposed skin.

"I don't know if it's your 'policy' or what, but wearing that was your undoing! Perish! Orya orya orya[2]!"

Like a dog digging at the ground, I kicked up snow and hurled it at Naga.

"No Eeeeeeeee! Wait, Lina! It's cold! Cold!"

Naga writhed and screamed. Even with gloves on, my fingertips were freezing—I couldn't imagine what it felt like on bare skin. I kept shoveling snow with glee.

"Wait! Enough! STOP IT!"

Naga let out a furious roar, and the snow chunks on the ground rose into the air again. Had her anger reignited her will to fight? I jumped back to keep my distance. Our gazes locked—but I didn't miss it. Naga's body was trembling uncontrollably.

"D-d-don't th-th-think you've b-b-beaten this White Serpent Naga w-w-with just th-th-that!" Her lips were losing their color. Honestly, even though I did it, she looked miserably cold. However! I had zero sympathy. If I didn't finish her here, things would get annoying later.

"UNYAHAAAAAAAA!" Naga screamed again.

I began chanting. "I won't let you win!"

At her voice, three of her snowballs broke their orbit and came at me. But the movement was sloppy. I easily dodged, kicked up a large cloud of snow, and released my spell.

"Damp Voe!"

---

[2] Yes, this is a jojo reference

It was just a spell to create a strong gust of wind. But the wind caught the powdered snow I had kicked up and sent it swirling toward Naga. She tried to make a shield, but she couldn't block every single grain of snow dancing in the turbulent air. Her snowballs fell to the earth.

"The match is over, Naga," I said, looking down at her as she crouched there, shivering. "That outfit is your weakness. The moment I realized that, your chance of winning vanished. From here on, the more time passes, the slower you'll get."

Naga looked up, her eyes wide. "L-L-Lina... b-b-behind you..."

"Behind me? You think I'll fall for that?" I barked. If there were an enemy behind me, I'd feel their presence, and besides, Naga wouldn't be the one to warn me. Behind me, at most, was just something making a weird noise.

Biki... biki biki...

A weird noise?

Keeping an eye on Naga, I glanced over my shoulder. I saw the town of Riette on the shore and the golem I had left behind walking toward us. It was nothing. The noise was just the ice cracking under the golem's weight... eh?

"Wait...!"

I turned around and realized the truth. Battles sometimes yield empty results. Like this situation.

Achui! I sneezed.

Back on the shore, I had shouted "Everyone, charge!" to encourage the troops. The golem I had left alone took that as a direct command.

Now, here is a question. What happens when a large group of people get caught up in a fight on top of ice, and then a golem cracks that very ice? Can the ice withstand the combined weight and damage?

The answer is simple. Bekibizaboon!

The ice shattered into pieces, and me, Naga, the enemies, and my allies were all swallowed by the lake.

I let out another strange sneeze. I gripped the edge of my blanket and huddled closer to the stove. We were at an inn in Riette. The room was filled with stoves and people wrapped in blankets. After the ice broke, everyone who climbed out or was rescued ended up here to get warm. Fortunately, no one died. At this point, there was no festival, no enemy, and no allies. Naga's face was still visible near me.

Blue headbands and Red headbands were shivering side-by-side without distinction.

"Lina... it's because you created that golem..." Naga shot me a resentful look.

Seriously? She was going to start that now?

That golem was currently at the bottom of the lake. Its massive body, fashioned from earth and sand, had barely advanced a few steps into the water before it dissolved and collapsed.

Unexpectedly, it was Mayor Clive—the owner of the inn—who stepped in to soothe Naga. The demonic expression he had shown during the snowball fight was gone; instead, he directed a gentle, beaming smile toward Naga. "You are the guests from Mio Town, I presume? However, now that the lake ice has cracked, the Snowball Festival is over. Please, calm your heart."

Well, it was true that my forgetting about the golem had been the deciding factor in breaking the ice... but I had a feeling that if I admitted it honestly, everyone around us would hate me and beat me to a pulp. Then again, I couldn't exactly play dumb and act like I knew nothing about a golem.

"Indeed—"

I decided to talk my way out of it! I nodded with a solemn expression. "I admit that the rampage of the golem I accidentally left behind was the catalyst for this. However—" I looked off into the distance with a faraway gaze. "If you think of this as a life experience..."

"I can't think of it that way!" Naga yelled.

"Now, now, young lady," the Mayor interceded. Before I knew it, the people who were enemies just a moment ago were looking at us with calm eyes. There wasn't a hint of resentment toward me. Naga, however, still looked dissatisfied.

"I... I hear what you're saying... but we were dropped into a frozen lake! Aren't you people angry!?"

Neither Naga nor I could understand the Mayor’s response.

"No. It happens like this every year."

For a moment, silence. "...It happens... every year...?"

As I asked, the Mayor explained, "Every year the festival gets so heated that everyone ends up clashing in the middle of the lake. The ice breaks, and things come to an end—that's just the flow of it. Usually, it happens in the afternoon when the temperature rises and the ice gets brittle, so I don't feel angry just because it happened a little earlier."

"Every year you take a dunk! ...But doing stuff like that, I'm surprised nobody dies..."

The Mayor smiled at my comment. "Oh? Did I say nobody dies?"

He said it so casually that Naga and I fell silent. That meant, uh, people do die sometimes, right?

Could it be that this festival, which sounds so peaceful when you only hear its name, is actually quite life-threatening? The sheer absurdity of it completely took the sting out of Naga, and I backed away a little. The Mayor, still wearing that unchanging smile, said to us:

"Well! However, with the participation of you two this year, there was more passion than usual. If you like, please join us again next year."

"No thank you!"

Our voices harmonized perfectly. The world is a wide place. All sorts of people live in it, and sometimes there are strange festivals. But I must never forget. There are strange festivals in this world where one might be exposed to life-threatening danger

I will stop joining strange festivals just for the fun of it. I swore this firmly in my heart.

Seeking The Lost Preparation Money

There was something black on the side of the road. It looked like a person in their mid-thirties with short blonde hair. As I walked through a large town on my journey, looking for an inn for the night, I spotted it lying facedown at the edge of the street.

"Magrid... san?"

The black mass moved. "Ugh..."

Was he a vagrant, or just someone who had passed out drunk in the middle of the day? Either way, I didn't want to get involved. But he definitely knew me.

"Li... Lina-kun...?"

The man stopped moving for a second and turned his face toward me. His face was a bit dirty, but I recognized him. His outfit caught my eye: a black mantle and a black hood. It was the typical "Mage Style." As a traveling mage myself, Lina Inverse, it would leave a bit of a bad taste in my mouth to abandon a colleague.

I slowed my pace, wondering what to do. This Mr. Magrid was the Vice-Chairman of the Vait City Mages' Guild. A while back, I had accompanied him on an investigation of some discovered ruins. Well, in the end, the "ruins" turned out to be a colosseum-style arena built by the King of Calmart...

I didn't know what happened after that, but why was someone of his status in this state? Regardless of the circumstances, I raised a hand and called out:

"Good luck with your work! See ya!"

I started to walk away briskly.

"Li-Li-Li-Lina-kun!"

He scrambled up and grabbed the hem of my mantle with a speed that far exceeded my expectations.

"Wait...? You're surprisingly energetic!"

He was desperate. I tried to shake him off, but he showed no sign of letting go. I had no choice but to offer him my salad. "...Here... I mean... you can have it all..."

At that, he began listing every word of praise and gratitude humanity had ever conceived while stuffing the salad into his mouth. I ended up having to listen to his story.

The small restaurant was sparse, even including us. As Magrid-san wolfed down the parsley that came with my salad, he shed tears of joy. "To think the parsley garnish could taste so sweet and delicious... it's worth living a long life!"

"Magrid-san... please calm down! I'll treat you to something, just calm down!"

"What are you saying, Lina-kun! I am already at my limit! It's like a candle that burns brightest just before it goes out! If you don't want to see the light of an acquaintance's life extinguished before your eyes, just share some food! Bread crusts! Cabbage cores! Anything!"

People were staring. I awkwardly asked, "Would you... like some cabbage too?"

He looked at me with an expression of shock, followed by a torrent of tears. "To think I could even have cabbage! Oh God...!"

I had been worshipped for a piece of cabbage.

Eventually, more dishes arrived. After he finally put down his knife and fork and returned to looking human, he spoke. He had started calling me "Lina-sama" instead of "Lina-kun." (TN: This is like going from calling her Linabuddy to calling her Misses Lina)

"Ah, that’s embarrassing. Please stick to 'kun.' So, why was a Vice-Chairman like you lying in the street?"

His face darkened. He reminded me of that incident at the arena. I realized then that I probably shared some of the responsibility for his current situation.

"After that, I received a reprimand from the King's messenger..."

"I figured..." I groaned. We had broken into the King's facility and trashed the place. Depending on the King's mood, it could have been a death sentence.

"But the King said it served as a good test for the Colosseum. He asked for my honest opinion on the facility."

I listened, feeling a sense of relief that he hadn't been ruined by that event. He continued.

"I told him it lacked 'Romance.' I said the beasts—the chimeras—were too boring. There was no variety. I suggested that for it to be a true entertainment facility, there needed to be an element of luck and variety—where a participant might face a weakling, a treasure, or a powerful foe. That tension is what creates romance!"

The messenger had been impressed and appointed him to supervise the selection of new "enemies" for the Colosseum. He was given a large sum of preparation funds.

"So, what happened?"

He grimaced. "Those funds... were stolen by my subordinate."

"Yikes..." I groaned. "Magrid-san... didn't you get betrayed by a subordinate last time too?"

"Yes! But one must overcome trials to move toward the future!"

I didn't think this was a "trial"; I thought it was a lack of leadership skills. Anyway, he couldn't do the job without the money, and having the King's money stolen by an insider was a disgrace to the Vait City Mages' Guild. He had been chasing the subordinate himself until he ran out of travel money and collapsed.

He leaned across the table. "So, Lina-kun! Help me find him!"

I had expected this. It sounded like a hassle, but since I was partly involved and there was a potential profit, I decided to negotiate. "It depends on the job and the reward. Since you have no money, I'd have to front the expenses."

The subordinate's name was Kerkes Iron. He had no family and was reportedly in debt. Magrid had heard a rumor that someone matching his description had headed this way.

"I have an idea," I said, waving my fork. "Did this Kerkes ever live in another town? Like the capital of Calmart?"

Magrid thought for a moment. "He lived in Vait, but he often visited other guilds for research. He would have been to the capital's guild."

"I see. I'll help you. But first, let's settle the fee."

I gave him a bright smile.

The capital of Calmart, Calma City, was bustling. We stood before the grand building of the Calma City Mages' Guild. Magrid was now wearing a newly purchased, high-quality mantle—the cost of which I planned to bill him for later.

"Okay, Magrid-san. Just like we discussed."

He nodded and walked into the guild. He approached a young mage at the entrance. "I am Taurus Magrid, Vice-Chairman of the Vait City Mages' Guild. I believe someone here was commissioned by the King to create chimeras. I don't have an appointment, but could you announce me?"

"Oh, Vice-Chairman Portland? Please wait a moment."

The young mage disappeared into the back. My first prediction was correct. After a while, the mage returned, looking flustered.

"I'm sorry. The Vice-Chairman is not in right now..."

Magrid and I exchanged a silent look. I had considered this possibility.

"Could you tell us where he is? I'd like to visit him directly."

"Uh... no... that is..." The man's eyes darted around. "I don't know where he is right now..."

"I see. Then, his home address?"

The man hesitated. Magrid smiled. "Ah, forgive me. You can't give out a home address to someone without an appointment. I'll come back tomorrow. Just tell him Magrid from Vait called."

We left the building. Once outside, I whispered, "Definitely felt like he was 'not home' on purpose."

"It went exactly as you said, Lina-kun... but what does it mean?"

"I'll tell you once I'm sure," I replied. We turned a corner and I removed my mantle, checking if we were being followed. It seemed we were in the clear. "For now, we stick to the plan."

"Understood. But explain it to me later!"

"Of course."

Next, Magrid-san and I turned the same corner again. I removed my shoulder guards, and Magrid-san shed his black robe to reveal ordinary brown clothes underneath. With that, we probably looked like anything but mages to a stranger. I wrapped my removed gear in my cloak and slung it over my shoulder like a traveler’s pack.

We hung around for a while, making idle small talk while circling the city blocks until we reached a spot with a view of the Mage Guild’s back entrance. Eventually, the door opened, and an elderly man stepped out. His hair was slicked back and he sported a mustache flecked with white. Even without a cloak, he had the unmistakable air of a mage. This was likely our man—Vice-Councilor Portland.

The man looked around and surely saw us, but thanks to our discarded robes and the fact that we had never met, he didn't give us a second glance. He hurried off, and we followed at a distance. As we left the main street, the crowds thinned, increasing the risk of being spotted. However, before long, the man in the robe ducked into a small inn.

"Magrid-san, wait here for a bit. Also, take care of the luggage," I said.

"O-Oh, alright," he replied.

I shoved the bundle into his arms, waited a few moments, then pulled a silver coin from my pocket and stepped through the entrance. It was a typical inn—an eatery on the first floor and guest rooms on the second. Since it was an off-hour in the afternoon, there were no customers, just an old man sweeping the floor.

"Excuse me!" I called out, showing him the silver coin. "The man in the black robe who just came in dropped this. Do you know where he went?"

"Oh, that fellow? I'll return it for you," the man said, reaching out.

I wagged my finger at him. "No, no. If I give it to him directly, I might get a reward. If I do, I'll give you a cut."

The old man gave a wry smile. "Haha, well, I guess I can't argue with that. He's not exactly a guest, but his companion took a room on the second floor. The one at the very end."

"Thanks!" I gave a light wave and headed up the stairs.

Once I reached the top, I masked my footsteps and presence as I moved down the hallway.

"—You're kidding? Why!?" an unknown man's voice shouted from behind the closed door at the end.

"Don't raise your voice!" another voice barked in reprimand.

Despite their attempt to keep quiet, the door was poorly fitted, and the sound leaked out. I crept closer, ears strained.

".....But why is Magrid here.....! There's no way he should have found out, right?" the first man asked. Judging by his tone, he sounded middle-aged.

"How should I know?" replied the other, his voice raspy with age.

The speakers were almost certainly Kerks and Vice-Councilor Portland. I pressed my ear lightly against the door.

"He might have just come on other business. Regardless, we'll know once we talk to him directly. But we can't be too careful. Don't go outside much."

"Wh... talk directly...? You mean you're going to meet him?"

"This was sudden, so I pretended to be out just now... but he's a colleague. I can't keep refusing to see him. That would only make him more suspicious."

".....Don't betray me....."

"Don't be ridiculous. What would I gain by siding with them? Rather than that, listen to me for a moment."

"Eh!?"

"Don't make a sound. Just do exactly as I say right now."

I couldn't hear what the old man said next, but it didn't matter—I knew enough! I chanted a spell under my breath.

"Damu Brass!" (Vibration Bullet)

The shockwave blasted the doorknob. At that exact moment—

"—K-Kerks!"

Magrid-san's voice shouted from outside the window! I kicked the door open and burst inside, but the room was empty. The window in front of me was wide open. The two of them had noticed my presence and jumped out to escape! For their age, they were surprisingly spry.

I ran to the window and looked down to see Magrid-san looking flustered. Across the street, two figures in black robes were disappearing! One was carrying a large bag—likely the preparation funds! I made up my mind, climbed onto the windowsill, and leaped.

I landed with a thud and started to run.

"Li! Lina-kun!"

Magrid-san suddenly jumped out in front of me. I lost my balance, stumbled, and bumped into him.

"Oh!"

"I know! Let's go after them!" I snapped, regrouping as I dashed toward where they had vanished. But by the time I turned the corner, they were gone. The delay had been too long.

After losing the two men at the inn, Magrid-san and I returned to our mage attire and headed back to the Mage Guild. We demanded an audience with Council Chairman Mort, claiming we had news concerning the guild's very survival.

The man who met us looked irritable. He was an old man with white hair who looked naturally grumpy.

"What is this about? How does this concern the survival of this guild?"

"I'll be the one speaking," I said, sitting down without waiting to be asked. Magrid-san followed my lead.

"I believe you've heard that the King of Kalmart commissioned Vice-Councilor Portland to create Chimeras for the colosseum currently under construction."

"Yes. Portland bragged about it quite a bit. Most people here know."

"Well," I continued, "Portland's job ended safely. However, the King decided to entrust the preparation and supervision of additional Chimeras to a completely different mage."

I nodded slightly. "That new mage is none other than Vice-Councilor Magrid here. Portland must have found out. Instead of a new order going to him, it went to someone else. He felt his face was lost and his work insulted. So, out of spite, he coaxed one of Magrid-san's subordinates to steal the preparation funds the King had provided."

"Wha...!?"

Both the Chairman and Magrid-san stood up from their chairs at the same time.

"Lina-kun! Is that what this is about?" Magrid-san asked.

The Chairman looked at him, bewildered. "Eh!? Why are you the one who's surprised!?" He then turned to me. "Is this true?"

"Yes. I kept quiet because I didn't have proof until now."

To be honest, I had suspected it from the start. Mages in need of funds often turn to illicit methods. However, why choose the King's money? If they wanted to steal, a guild's grimoires would be less risky. Stealing from the King is a capital offense.

"Vice-Councilor Portland has hair slicked back and a mustache, right? I just saw him meeting with Kerks—the man who ran off with the money—at a nearby inn. If this reaches the King's ears, this entire guild will be held responsible. That's what I meant

by 'survival.' We need to secure them both immediately. If the Guild takes the lead in solving this, you can claim the Guild itself had no part in it."

The Chairman groaned, but he had no choice. "......Fine. We will cooperate."

A tense atmosphere hung over the city. We stood before the gates of Vice-Councilor Portland's private residence. Mort, Magrid-san, and I were out front, but the Chairman had deployed mages disguised as commoners all around the block.

The Chairman pounded the dragon-head door knocker. A young maid appeared—about twenty, dressed in a black dress with a bright red headband and apron.

"Do you have business with this house?"

"I am Mort, Chairman of the Mage Guild. I believe the Vice-Councilor is in. Inform him of my arrival."

"And these people?" she asked, looking at us.

"My attendants," Mort said coolly.

"Forgive me, but may I have the names of your attendants?"

"I will introduce them to the Vice-Councilor myself. Now, announce us."

The maid didn't change her expression, but she hesitated for a split second. "......I am sorry, but my master is currently out."

"Then who was just peeking at us through the gap in the curtains?" I interjected.

"My master is out."

She was a wall, but her silence confirmed it. My lie about the curtains worked—no one would risk showing their face now, but she had glanced toward the house instinctively. I had actually caught a glimpse of an old man hiding behind a curtain in one of the windows.

"Open the door. This concerns your master's safety and the future of the Guild."

"I cannot do that on my own authority."

As she and the Chairman went back and forth, I began chanting.

"Ray Wing!" (Flight)

I leaped over the gate in a burst of speed. I caught a glimpse of her shocked face as I soared toward the window where I had seen Portland. If I could just secure him and Kerks, it would be over!

I slammed into the second-story window—but was repelled! The frames were reinforced with metal for security. Cursing his cautiousness, I landed and dashed for the door. It was unlocked. I burst into a hall with blue carpets and ran toward the stairs.

Suddenly, a fierce killing intent flared behind me. I spun around to see the maid chasing me, her eyes filled with a quiet, demonic energy.

"Lina-kun, watch out!" Mort shouted from outside. "That's Portland's personal 'Executioner Maid'! They say her headband and apron are stained red with the blood of uninvited guests!"

That... didn't even sound like a maid anymore. I didn't have time for her. I finished my next spell.

"Ray Wing!"

I used the flight spell again to bypass her and zoomed up the stairs. I reached the door I had pinpointed earlier. It was locked, but I expected that.

"Damu Brass!"

I shattered the doorknob and kicked the door open. Inside were Portland, Kerks, and... about twenty more maids!

"Too many! There are too many maids!" I yelled.

They charged at me, all wearing the red-on-black battle style. I couldn't take them all at this range, so I dashed back into the hallway, chanting.

"Don't let her escape!" the maids screamed.

"That's enough out of all of you!" another voice roared.

Chairman Mort, Magrid-san, and dozens of Guild mages were charging up the stairs. The two groups collided in the hallway. It was absolute chaos. Mort wanted to use the confusion to grab Portland; Portland wanted to use it to escape.

Several maids lunged for me, but my spell was ready.

"Dill Brand!" (Earth Shockwave/Wind variant)

My blast blew away a crowd of maids and mages alike. Mort and Magrid-san were caught in the crossfire, but Portland and Kerks, who had stayed in the room, were still standing. I didn't give them a chance.

"You guys fly too! Kiyah!"

I delivered a flying kick that sent them both tumbling.

"Gubuehh!"

Portland glared at me as he scrambled up. "You... are you insane? Attacking your own allies too...!"

"Shut up!" I snapped, spinning around to floor another maid who had been trying to sneak up on me from behind.

Without turning around, I kicked him down and shouted in a voice that echoed throughout the area, "I don't need to be told I'm crazy by someone who'd lay a hand on the King's money! If things go south, the heads of your entire family and all your servants will fly!"

At my words, the remaining maids trembled. Portland struggled to escape his captors, but the maids showed no sign of letting go.

Portland finally looked up, his face full of shock.

"This is the end, Portland!" Having apparently recovered, Council Chairman Molt entered the room, looking a bit unsteady.

Magrid followed him, turning a momentarily disgruntled gaze toward me. Perhaps thinking that now was not the time for complaints, he glared at Portland instead. "We know everything. Just give up already!"

"B-but, Chairman...!"

"Wait," Magrid interrupted. At his sharp command, Portland slumped forward, dejected.

Magrid stood directly in front of the pinioned Portland. "Vice-Chairman Portland."

Suddenly, one of the maids grabbed the Vice-Chairman from behind in a firm hold.

"Excuses are useless! This may not end with just your punishment!"

"W-what are you doing? Let go!" Portland cried.

Beside him, another maid grabbed Kerks in a similar hold.

"We..."

"We..."

"Are innocent."

"Are innocent."

It seemed my words about heads flying had been effective; they began pleading their innocence one after another.

Portland refused to lift his head, even when addressed. Ignoring this, Magrid continued, "I want to ask for your help in creating the Chimera commissioned by the King."

"Wh—a—?"

There was no longer any way for Portland to escape.

"Kerks. Good work contacting Vice-Chairman Portland. You still have the preparation funds I entrusted to you, don't you?"

"...Eh...?"

Magrid looked over his shoulder at Chairman Molt and me. "I think if we frame it like this, we can settle things peacefully. What do you think?"

I see. So there was a trick like that. At his question, Chairman Molt and the sorcerers began to buzz with conversation.

The Chairman looked puzzled. "As for us, we have no particular objection, but... is that alright? Surely the people from the Association won't be satisfied with that?"

"I'll make them satisfied. Kerks is a member of this Association. If this becomes public, the Association might be held responsible as well. If I explain it that way, they'll have no choice but to accept it."

Magrid turned back toward Portland and Kerks. "However, even if we settle this quietly after what you've done, there will be a corresponding penalty for you both. Vice-Chairman Portland, you will be paying quite a bit out of your own pocket for the Chimera production. Also, for monitoring purposes, the basic right of command and payment for the maids here will remain yours, but the personnel rights and higher command authority will be transferred to me or Chairman Molt. Kerks, your actions will be monitored from now on, and your salary will likely be docked. There is no room for negotiation on these terms. If you two refuse, we will go public, you will face the King's judgment, and at best, you'll be imprisoned. What will it be?"

He presented them with the two choices.

"...I understand..."

"I... beg of you, please..."

They both slumped their heads in defeat.

And so, the incident came to an end. Or rather, to be precise, the incident was treated as if it had never happened.

I, of course, received an ample reward and had no complaints. Preparations for the opening of the Coliseum were reportedly underway.

Under Magrid, Portland worked hard on creating the Chimera while being watched by the maids, and Kerks was apparently flying about here and there as a general errand boy.

I thought that once the Coliseum opened, it might be nice to visit at least once. With that in mind, I set out on my journey once again.

(End of Seeking the Lost Preparation Funds)

Afterword

L: Well, that’s a wrap!

Author: It’s finished.

L: Man... no matter what happens, humans just keep on living like nothing’s wrong, even through climate change and shifting situations.

Author: Exactly. When it’s time to perish, we perish.

L: And speaking of things that are booming right now—that game!

Author: Oh, definitely. Everyone I know is playing it.

L: I don’t go out much because of my line of work, but I still see people playing it on train platforms and in the fast-food corners of big supermarkets.

Author: Lately, even the cherry blossom buds are starting to bloom near my house (as of November—a true story). The weird weather is reaching its limit.

L: Is there even a lead-up to a story like that?!

Author: But look! Isn't it a bit festive to hear news about cherry blossoms so early in the year?

L: What part of that story was festive?! It’s terrifying! If you can see blossoms this early, it means the world is in trouble.

Author: They were blooming. Only one flower back in October, though. And I’m talking about a cherry tree outside in the wind, not in a greenhouse.

L: ...Wow... that’s... I really think something is going wrong with this world...

Author: But you know, when I was a kid, people said "oil will run out in thirty years," and yet there’s no sign of that happening yet. People say global warming will make things dangerous in a few decades, but by then...

L: We might just be living leisurely, thinking "it is what it is."

Author: I heard some people have insane playtimes because they're so addicted. By the way, how much did you play?

L: Wait, me? Uh... my total playtime is about two and a half minutes?

Author: Ho ho.

L: I just wanted to see what was popular in the world! It’s called market research! Anyway, let's talk about the book!

Author: Fine, fine. But in this story and others, whenever I write about snow, it’s always piling up. I don’t have any memory of writing just a light dusting.

L: Is that so?

Author: Well, I grew up in a region where the snow piled up quite a bit. Even if it didn't pile up, just the fact that it was falling would get me excited. I’d walk to the next station without an umbrella and only realize how freezing I was once I got home.

L: Were you one of those people who had to enter the house through the second-floor window?

Author: No, not that far. Even when it piled up, it was maybe at knee-height. But thanks to that, my brain is wired to think "Snow = Piling Up." Even with snow on the ground, the school trains ran on time, everyone rode their bikes on the paths packed down by car tires...

L: That sounds like you’d wipe out the moment you messed up the steering.

Author: Oh, people wiped out. I had a friend who climbed onto the train with blood dripping from his head, saying, "I fell on the way!"

L: ...Wait... that sounds more like a reason to hate snow...

Author: Sometimes the train would stop at the next station because of the snow, and we’d decide to walk home since it was only thirty minutes away. That white heron standing in the stream while the snow fell was so beautiful.

L: You really like it that much?

Author: It’s cold and a hassle, but it’s beautiful, so I like it.

L: Well then... (rummaging through my pouch) I happen to have something perfect for an author who loves snow so much.

Author: I have a very bad feeling about this... you’re going to say "the freezer of a tuna boat," aren't you?

L: Nope. The middle of the Northern Alps in the dead of winter.

Author: Why is that in your pouch—?!

(WHOOOOOOOSH—Blizzard sounds)

L: Wow. Huge blizzard. I wonder if you can call ice sticking to things that aren't trees "frost-covered trees" too? Oh well, in cases like this, we can just wrap it up by saying, "That's the price of taking the fury of nature too lightly!"

ILLUSTRATIONS

『――!?』
その先にひろがった光景に、
一同は思わず息を呑んでいた。
「……何コレ……」
スレイヤーズすぺしゃる30
白銀の弾丸

年がら年中、薄着のナーガの弱点を発見！
「おりゃおりゃおりゃおりゃおりゃおりゃっ！」
リナはあたりの雪をかき集めて、ナーガに集中攻撃！

「主が不在である以上、私の一存では
そのようなことはできません」
メイドは感情のない声で言い放った。

47　白銀の弾丸　スレイヤーズすぺしゃる30

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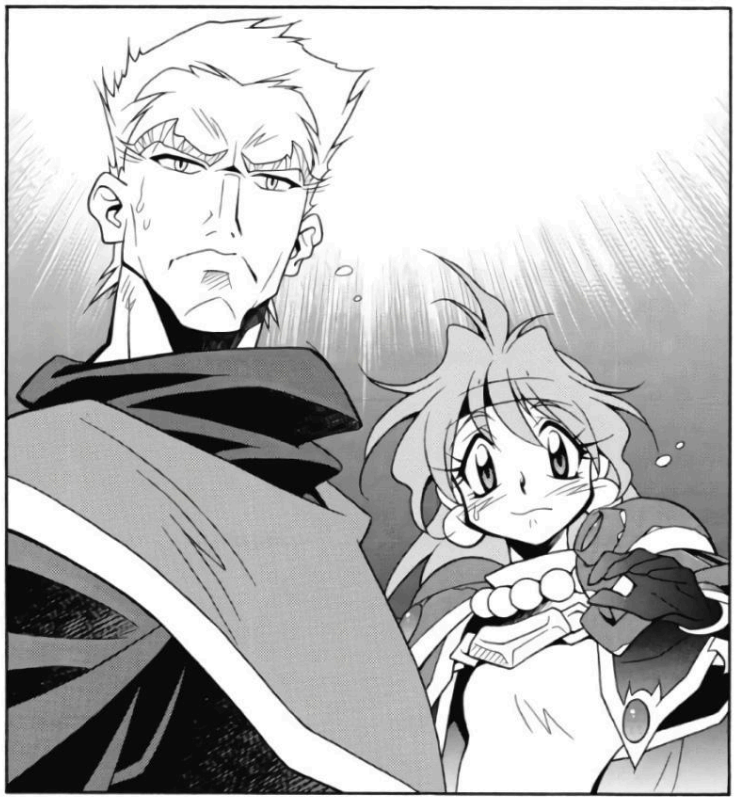

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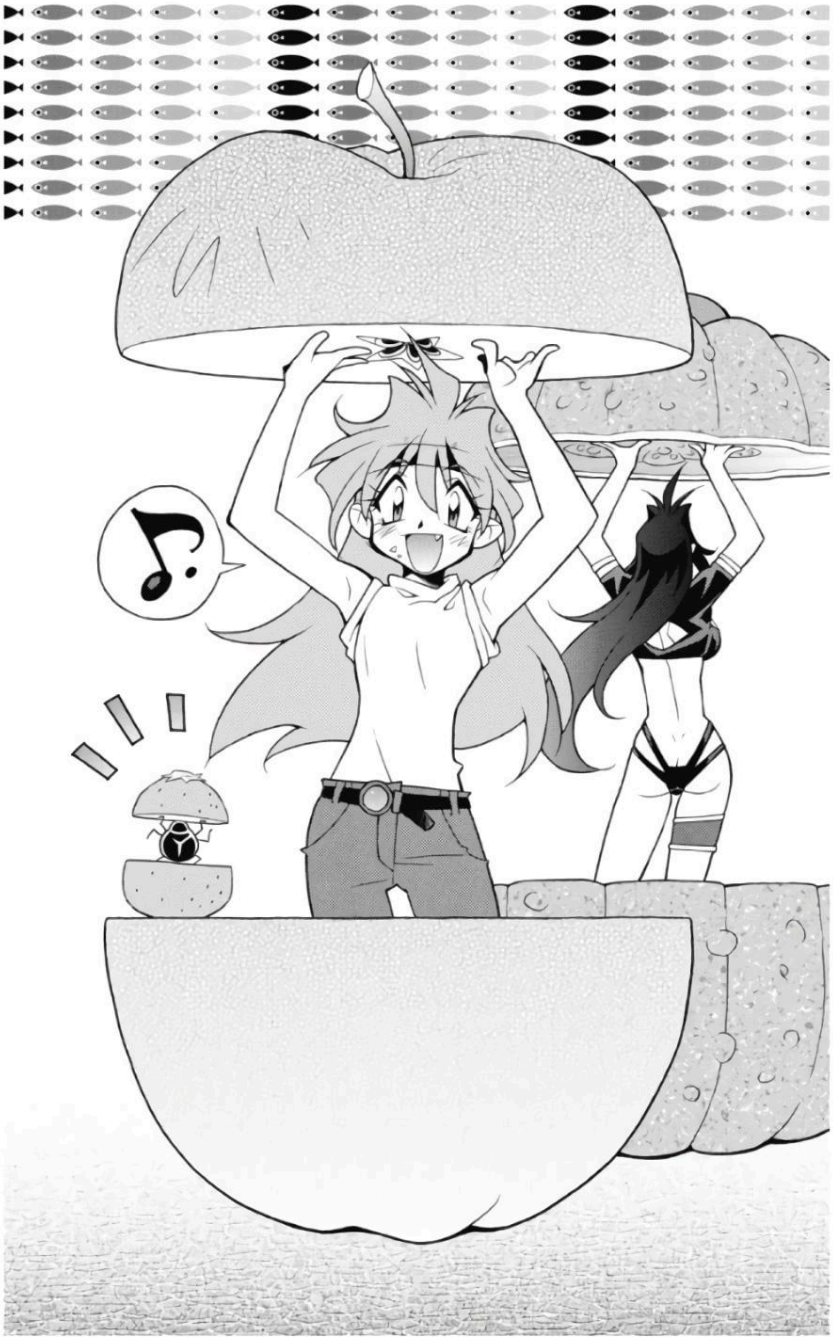

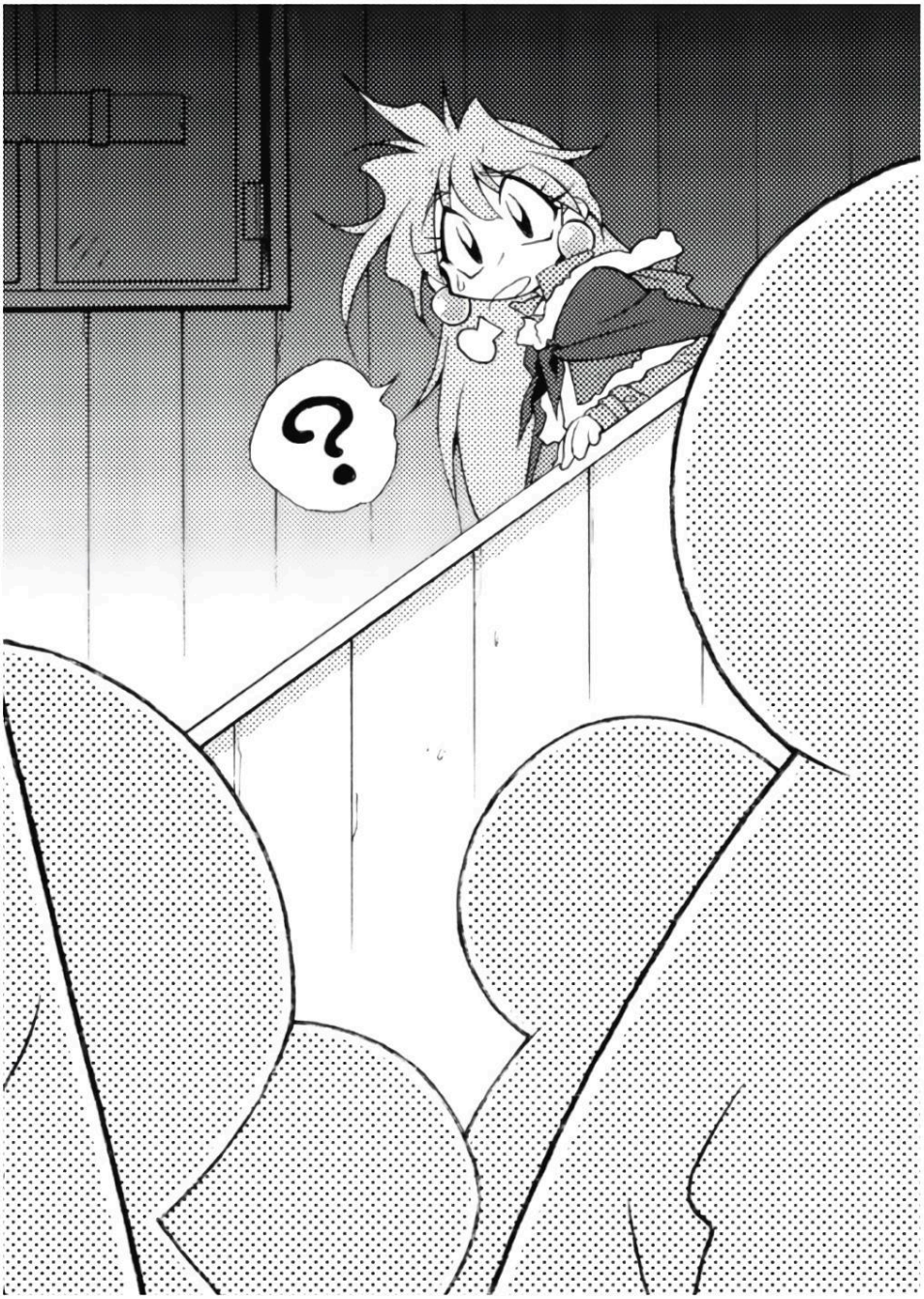

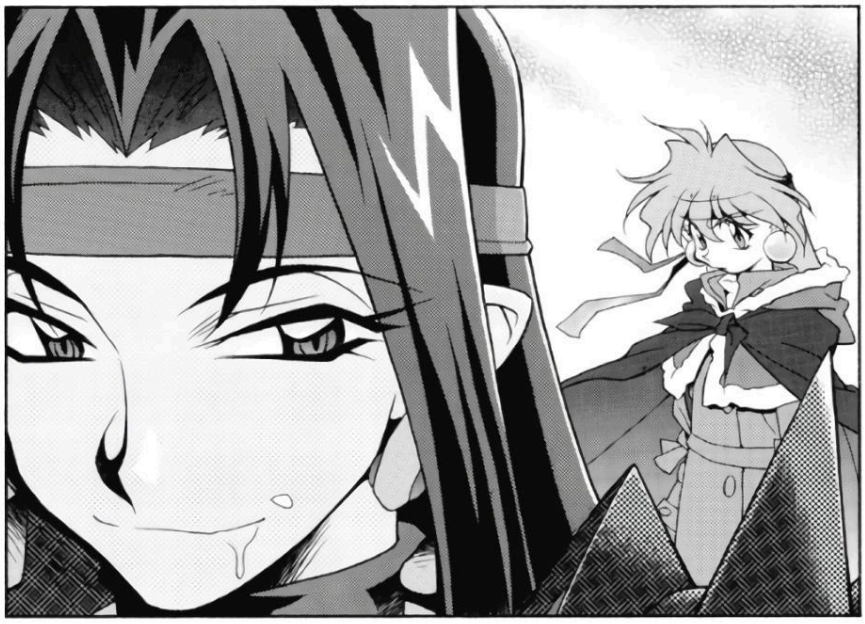

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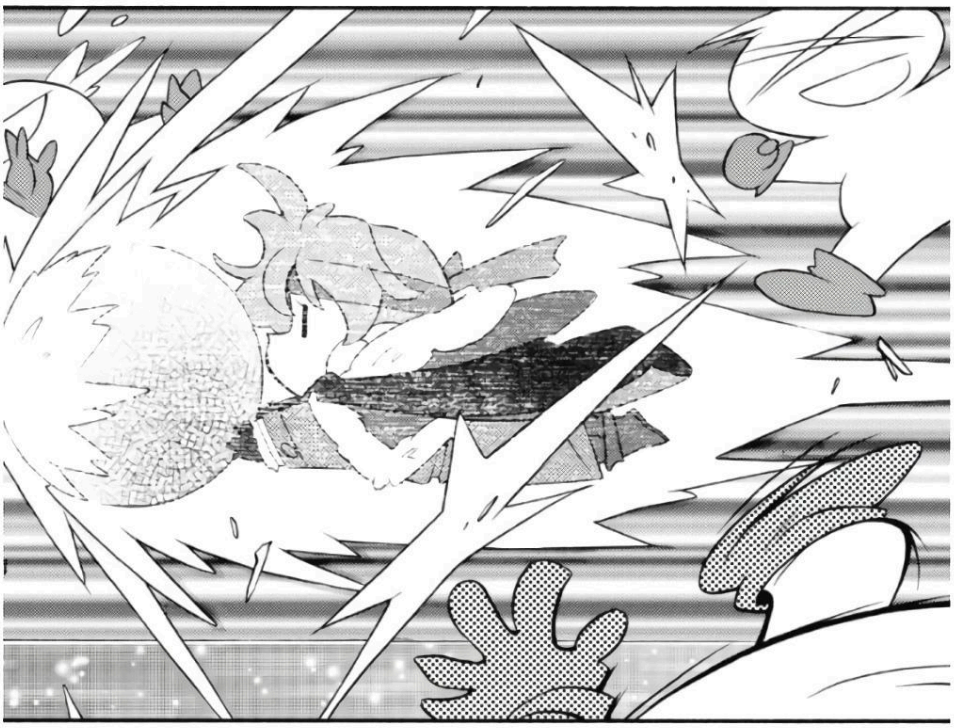

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